



40 years later,

# The Way We Were

charter class members

recall the days OU first

set sail — by *Cindy Hampel*

Excited and nervous, Beverly Donato SEHS '63 wore a new dress, wanting to look her best for her first day of college.

But the weather didn't cooperate. It was a bit muggy, she recalls, and she knew she would have what today is called "a bad hair day."

She was among 570 students who crowded into the unfinished student center cafeteria for the opening convocation of Michigan State University Oakland September 17, 1959. With no air conditioning and tapping hammers in the background, the students listened to Dean of Faculty Robert Hoopes. Those students, taking a chance on a newly minted university, couldn't guess what would await them. Some had billed MSUO as "The Harvard of the Midwest" with high standards and a classical liberal arts curriculum. Expectations were high for the students and the faculty who would prepare them for the world.

Faculty members were unique. Their average age was 33, notes a charter class yearbook, the youngest of any college in America. And of the 25 professors, 23 had earned doctoral degrees. "Our mission is to create well-rounded men," said Hoopes, using the then-common term for people of both genders, "but men with sharp, abrasive edges; rebels with clear minds and uncowed consciences capable of being critics of society, not adjusters to it."

### 'Serious college'

But there was more. "One of the professors said, 'I want each of you students to look to the left and look to the right,'" recalls Tom Werth CAS '63, "because one of you won't be here next year.' I thought to myself, 'we're talking about some serious college here.'"

It was. By 1963, only 125 students would receive their diplomas. "We should

really be called survivors," says Beverly Donato Miller, who later married Ronald Miller SEHS '63.

Oakland University was founded in 1957, when Alfred and Matilda Wilson donated \$2 million and their 1,500-acre estate to Michigan State University to start a new college in Oakland County. Then called Michigan State University Oakland, it first opened its doors to

"Alfred and Matilda Wilson sent the students engraved invitations to tea" soon after MSUO opened, recalls Edward Gehres CAS '66. Gehres started classes in 1959 but took time off to work. "Matilda led the procession back to Meadow Brook Hall in her pink and gray '55 Dodge."

"We would see Matilda driving around campus," says Ronald Miller. "She always

could live at home and save the cost of room and board at another university. Others were excited about attending a new university and helping to shape it while it also shaped them. But one of the prime reasons was its focus on a classical liberal arts curriculum. The focus was so intense, in fact, that the charter class voted at that time not to have social fraternities or sororities, or competitive

high that the university made a new policy. If you took a class over, the first grade was wiped out."

### It's all Russian to me

Werth chose to study Russian. He didn't want to lag behind other students who might already have taken French in high school. "I gambled, thinking we'd all be going into Russian class totally stupid. I

dozen phrases," Werth says. "A couple years ago, I was at the Russian Embassy and said a few words. The people there were surprised and happy." And at a dinner last spring, he talked to the Russian ambassador who sat at his table.

Chinese would later be added to the choice of foreign languages, Evelyn Adams Gehres recalls. She found her course in non-Western studies useful years after she graduated. "I was a delegate to a world women's conference in China," she says. "When I traveled there, none of the environment or culture surprised me because I had studied it."

### DNA, art and music

Beverly Donato Miller had no plans to become a microbiologist, but she was fascinated by a science course taught by

the National Science Foundation's Herman Lewis, a world authority on DNA. "He was at the forefront of DNA research," she says. "We had lectures on how DNA worked, although at that time it was totally unknown to the public."

Art and music are now a vital part of life for Evelyn Adams Gehres. "I never would have taken the music and art classes that I took without that requirement," she

says. She thanks her art history professor, John Galloway, for nurturing her love of the arts.

The social studies requirement changed Werth's life. He entered college planning to study business administration, but found it didn't fit his personality. After taking courses in psychology and sociology, he changed his



North and South Foundation Halls and the "OC."



The city of Rochester welcomes MSUO with a picnic.

students in 1959. Today, more than 54,000 students have graduated from the university, which changed its name to Oakland University in 1963, the year of the first graduating class.

### 'We were her children'

The original campus consisted of three buildings: North Foundation Hall, South Foundation Hall and a small part of what is now Oakland Center. However, the charter class campus included an unofficial fourth site: Meadow Brook Hall. The Wilsons did more for the students than donate land and money.

drove and Mr. Wilson sat in the back of the car."

"Diane Lee was a student from Alaska who had no place to stay because the women's residence hall was not complete," Beverly Donato Miller recalls, "so the Wilsons let her stay with them at Meadow Brook. We were her children in a way."

### More reasons to stay

Although they enjoyed their cordial relationship with the Wilsons, the charter class chose to attend MSUO for other reasons. For some, it was affordable. They

sports teams.

Every student, regardless of major, had to take classes in art, music, philosophy, non-Western civilization, English, social studies, science, math and a foreign language (French or Russian). Ronald Miller remembers reading three or four books a week. "Two-thirds of the class failed economics," recalls Beverly Donato Miller. "I was just grateful to get through the class."

Evelyn Adams Gehres SEHS '63 says: "The first year, the failure rate was so



major. He used his knowledge of psychology and sociology for 31 years working as a juvenile court probation officer and referee. It was also useful during Werth's 12 years as mayor of Rochester, a city he continues to serve as a council member.

### Wanted: Renaissance men and women

Edward Gehres remembers: "At the opening convocation, D.B. "Woody" Varner said that to make the distinction between MSUO and many other colleges, it might be necessary to make the distinction between education and training." His wife agrees: "That was the attitude. That's how they approached us as students."

Edward Gehres says most of the faculty took seriously their mission to create students who were "capable of being critics." He remembers when George Matthews, professor of Western civilization, slammed his book shut in the middle of a lecture. "What's wrong with you people?" Matthews asked his class. "Nobody's asking questions. I could tell you the sky is green and the grass is blue and you'd write it down in your notebooks and memorize it." Matthews admonished the students for five minutes, Edward Gehres says. "Don't take everything as truth. Think about it; challenge it; ask questions." Those words, he says, have helped him through life, especially while pursuing an advanced degree in theology.

"What I learned was the importance of

knowing a variety of things in the world," Ronald Miller says, "of not being so specialized that people in different fields can't talk to each other. We were after a liberal arts degree, a degree that helped you become a full Renaissance person. You never finish learning. We found you really don't learn it all in four years and apply it forever. It just doesn't work that way."

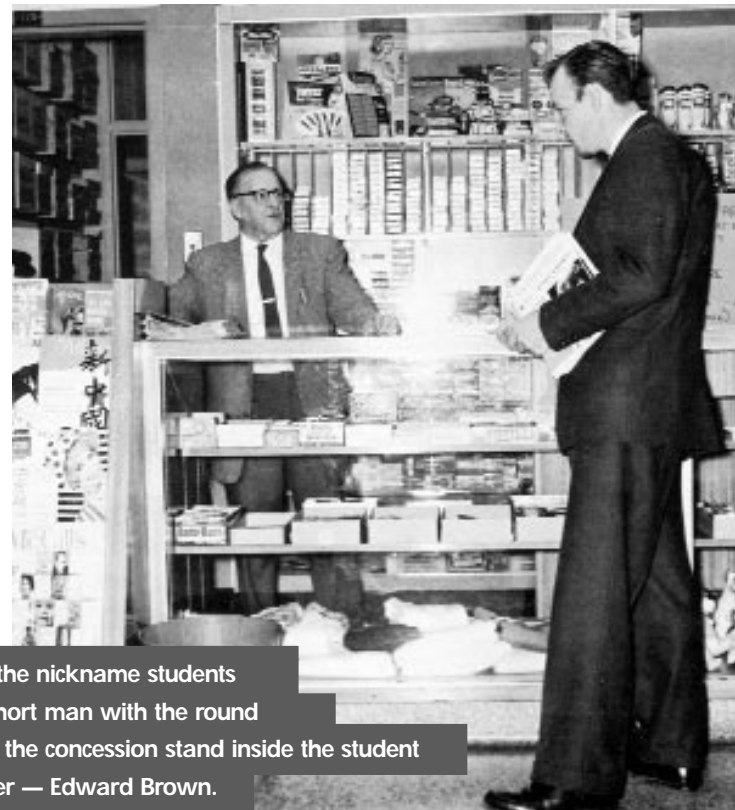
### Campus life

Forty years ago, there was no dress code, but students came to school dressed more conservatively than students today. It was like today's "business casual" attire, says Ronald Miller. Men would wear dress slacks and collared shirts or suitcoats. The women wore dresses or skirts. Beverly Donato Miller

remembers feeling a bit daring when she'd sometimes wear slacks at night to study in the library.

Beverly Donato Miller and Evelyn Adams Gehres say they were treated as equals among the male students, in class and student government. Both

participated in the campus association of women students, and Beverly Donato Miller says it was "a strong group" with many female students who were "determined that they'd have their own lives and their own careers." But Evelyn Adams Gehres, who lived on campus, said there were different rules at the



"Charlie Brown" was the nickname students gave to the short man with the round face who ran the concession stand inside the student center — Edward Brown.

men's and women's residence halls. "We had the standard curfew," she says, "but the guys didn't. There was no equality there."

Ronald Miller learned to play pinochle at MSUO and "had a blast" living for one term in a residence hall with 30 other

men. "I had to try it for one term, but it drove me nuts." Edward Gehres sang in an octet called the Oaken Buckets. He would also make clandestine missions to East Lansing. "For special occasions, we'd go to Michigan State and steal the bell they'd ring for touchdowns. It was not an easy thing to do because they'd guard it."

### There were no campus traditions

"We created the traditions," Edward Gehres says. "While we were there, we had the Chancellor's Ball that became Matilda Wilson's 80th birthday party, which was a surprise to her. "We chose the seal and the name of the university." But Evelyn Adams Gehres didn't like the seal, which shows a square Greek sail billowing in the wind. "We called it "The Flying Diaper," she says. Ronald Miller remembers other traditions. One he especially enjoyed was convincing the professors to give a "Last Lecture," a pretend final address of their lives. "Some of the lectures were profound," he says, "and some were funny."

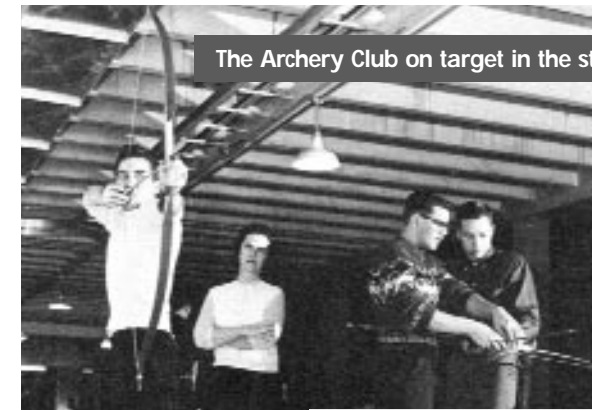
### Hello, Charlie Brown

Students knew everyone on campus by name, from the candy vendor to the chancellor.

"Charlie Brown" was the nickname students gave to the short man with the round face who ran the concession stand inside the student center. He sold candy, gum, cigarettes, magazines and newspapers, and signed yearbooks as "Charlie." His stand would often be the rendezvous point for students, says Evelyn Adams Gehres, with students telling each other: "I'll meet you for lunch at Charlie Brown's."

"Edward Brown was a personality," says Beverly Donato Miller, "and really friendly. He knew who you were and he would always say 'hi.'"

"There was a sense of camaraderie and



The Archery Club on target in the student center.



Students complete their entry for the snow statue contest.

## A snapshot of 1959

It was the year that Hawaii joined the Union as America's 50th state. But in 1959, the warm breezes of those tropical islands competed with the winds of the Cold War for coverage in the news. Caused by a clash between two different political and economic climates, the Cold War was the motive for United States President Dwight Eisenhower to hold summit talks with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at Camp David. The spread of Communism to China, and the resulting presence of the Red Chinese Army in the tiny mountain country of Tibet, spurred the Dalai Lama to leave his land and seek refuge in India.

But there were lighter moments as well. Americans watched Rock Hudson and Doris Day on the silver screen in the new movie *Pillow Talk*. Susan Hayward and David Niven took home Oscars as Best Actress and Best Actor during the Academy Awards. The toniest women sported hip ruffles on their bathing suits. Car headrests were hailed as a major automotive innovation. In Michigan, G. Mennen ("Soapy") Williams was serving his eleventh year as governor, and the National Basketball Association played its annual all-star game in Detroit. Meanwhile, some 30 miles north, a new four-year college – Michigan State University Oakland – was preparing to open its doors for the first time to a class of some 570 students.



**Matthews made a lasting contribution** George Matthews, a charter faculty member and former interim president of Oakland University, died last June at age 82. "Dr. Matthews made a lasting contribution to Oakland University by helping to shape the educational mission of OU in its early years as a respected teacher, scholar and administrator," said OU President Gary D. Russi at the time of Matthews' death. Matthews chaired the history department, and served as associate dean for the humanities during the early 1960s. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, he was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and later provost. As provost, he created several health science programs and presided over the initiation of the Bachelor of General Studies degree program. Matthews served as interim president of Oakland from 1979 to 1981.



Charter class seniors dance the night away in the ballroom of Meadow Brook Hall.



Senior dinner guests were served a midnight breakfast.



Edward Gehres CAS '66 and Evelyn Adams Gehres SEHS '63 (above)



Ronald Miller and Beverly Donato Miller SEHS '63 (left)

Beverly Donato Miller SEHS '63 met her future husband in high school, but didn't start dating him until they went to Michigan State University Oakland. She earned her bachelor's degree in secondary education, and majored in French and social studies. Donato Miller later returned to Oakland University to earn certification as a legal assistant. She works today for the Oakland County Circuit Court. She attended OU on a full scholarship and “wanted to give something back” by contributing financially to the university through membership in The President's Club.

Ronald Miller SEHS '63 is married to Beverly Donato Miller, and they have two children who also graduated from OU: Robert SECS '79 and Katherine MAT '70. Miller describes his undergraduate majors as elementary education and pinocle. He lived on campus for one term with 30 other men in “Dorm Type Pad Number One,” an old three-story caretaker's house on the Wilson Estate. “I had a blast, but I couldn't get any studying done,” he admits. He is now deputy superintendent of the Birmingham Schools. He helped found the Alumni Council and served as the group's second president. He received OU's Alumni Award of Appreciation in 1992.

Edward Gehres CAS '66 met his future wife at a party given by OU Business Professor Robert Simon. The mellow-voiced Gehres sang in the university men's octet, called The Oaken Buckets. Gehres recalls: “For special occasions, we would go to Michigan State and steal the bell that they'd ring for touchdowns.” They also appropriated the bell to help celebrate OU co-founder Matilda Wilson's 80th birthday. Gehres started classes in 1959 but took time off to work. Today he is executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Detroit.

Evelyn Adams Gehres SEHS '63 met Edward Gehres after transferring from Wayne State University to OU in 1961. She earned her bachelor's degree in secondary education, majoring in history and English. They married in 1964 and have one son. Adams Gehres is now development officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation. She feels a special connection to Matilda Wilson not only through OU, but because Wilson served as the foundation's first female trustee.

we were dismembering the Bible.”

The university received more unwanted press over a controversial history professor— Samuel Shapiro. “The university attracted free thinkers, people who were at the forefront of their areas,” Miller says. “Shapiro was an adviser to President Kennedy on Latin America. He was a brilliant man and the finest teacher I ever had.”

Evelyn Adams Gehres also named Shapiro as one of her most influential professors. “He was an incredible history teacher,” she says. “He was making trips to Cuba and the State Department was after him.” Ronald Miller recalls: “Shapiro said some things about Oakland County and about Castro and Cuba. He was taking the view that maybe Castro wasn't so wrong. He was fired

from Oakland because of his views. We had a big protest. We were marching for freedom of expression. The FBI came out to take our pictures. I was scared to death. Later, when I was invited to the White House to accept the National Exemplary Schools Award as principal of Berkshire Middle School (Birmingham, Michigan), I thought they'd find out the FBI had a dossier on me.”

**The prom and the ring**  
In April 1963, the night before graduation, Mrs. Wilson gave the charter class a prom. “We had dinner and a society orchestra in the ballroom at Meadow Brook Hall,” says Beverly Donato Miller. “It was a fairy tale. “We danced until 3 a.m.”

But the students have more than just a

intimacy you didn't find at a major state university because the community was so small,” says Edward Gehres. “You knew the faculty even if you didn't go to their classes. You knew the students whether you were in class with them or not.” Students often interacted with the professors socially, says Evelyn Adams Gehres. “Woody Varner knew us by name,” Edward Gehres recalls. “He greatly influenced me. He influenced all our lives. He was such a role model. He was outgoing and friendly to the students. Even though he was chancellor of the

university he was not always in his office hiding out. He was always encouraging and supportive and challenging.”

### Unwanted press

The charter class did experience campus controversies before their graduation.

“One of the things that hit the papers was the ‘Bible as Literature’ class that we took as part of our studies in Western civilization,” Ronald Miller says. “Some of the students were upset that we were studying the Bible as a piece of literature instead of as a philosophy. They thought

## A Charter Course

### Quick facts about Oakland University's first class:

- n Of the 570 students enrolled, 493 were full time.
- n 84 percent of the students were in the top half of their high school graduating classes and 55 percent were in the top quarter.
- n So many students flunked the first semester that MSUO enacted a policy to allow students to erase grades following repeat classes.
- n According to the national pattern of the time, 60 percent or 342 members of the 570 were expected to don a cap and gown in four years. By 1963, only 125 students received their diplomas.
- n The most popular major was teacher education. Next in order were liberal arts, engineering science and business administration.
- n The first issue of *The Oakland Observer*, the campus newspaper, reported: "The knoll just behind North and South Foundation Hall and the student center and to the left of the grazing sheep will be the site of the next university building: the library."
- n MSU President John Hannah reminded students during the inaugural September convocation, "You will set standards, establish precedents, originate traditions — in short, help to set the tone of MSUO."
- n Chancellor D.B. "Woody" Varner cautioned parents during a September convocation that a "work and school program was not feasible at MSUO. The student should be at school from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., five days a week."

memory of that night. "We weren't able to order our class rings until almost January of our senior year because of the university name change," recalls Werth. "We were expecting to get our class rings on the day of graduation because of the short delivery time. While we were all downstairs dancing in the ballroom, Mrs. Wilson said she wanted all of us to come up to her study. 'I have something for you,' she said. In the study she had all the little gift boxes with a card with our names in front of them. Inside the cards were the deposits that we had paid on our rings and inside the boxes were our gold rings for graduation. They're the only OU rings that have a diamond in them."

The party didn't end until the next day, Ronald Miller says, after the students ate breakfast under a tent in the Meadow Brook rose garden.

### A top-rated school

Since 1963 the university has undergone many changes, but some things remain. Marc Wasser CAS '99, a biology student, transferred from a larger university to OU in his sophomore year. "The classes there were bigger than I wanted and teaching assistants often taught them," he says. "At OU, the professors teach the classes and the class size is smaller. You can get to know the professors better."

"We took a chance on Oakland University," Werth says. "We didn't know what value a diploma from a brand new university would hold in the future. The academics were strenuous, and it was designed to be that way. I think it's because of that reputation that a diploma from Oakland University quickly became recognized as a diploma from a top-rated school."

— *Cindy Hampel is a freelance writer from Royal Oak, Michigan.*