40 years later, 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 “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, “men with sharp, abrasive edges; rebels with clear minds and uncowed consciences capable of being critics of society notadjusters 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.

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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 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 sports teams.

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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 apply it forever. It just doesn’t work that way.”

**Campus life**

Fifty 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 shoes and collared shirts or suits. The women were dresses or skirts. Beverly Donato Miller 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 have their own lives and their own careers.” But Evelyn Adams Gehres, who lived on campus, and there were different rules at the 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 pinocchio at MSUO and “had a blast” living for one term in a residence hall with 30 other students.

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“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. “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.”

**Hello, Charlie Brown**

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

Edward Gehres says, “While we were there, we had the Chancellor’s Ball that became Matthews’ Ball. 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.”

**There were no campus traditions**

“We created the traditions,” Edward Gehres says. “While we were there, we had the Chancellor’s Ball that became Matthews’ Ball. We chose the seal and the name of the university.”

**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..."
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 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 advisor 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
Quick facts about Oakland University's first class:

- Of the 570 students enrolled, 493 were full time.
- 84 percent of the students were in the top half of their high school graduating classes and 55 percent were in the top quarter.
- So many students flunked the first semester that MSUO enacted a policy to allow students to erase grades following repeat classes.
- 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.
- The most popular major was teacher education. Next in order were liberal arts, engineering science and business administration.
- 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.”
- 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.”
- 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 sophmore 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 freelancer from Royal Oak, Michigan.