

Friday, Dec 30, 2016

OU remembers founding chancellor Durward 'Woody' Varner on his 100th birthday

As the new year approaches, the Oakland University community is pausing to remember its first and only chancellor, Durward "Woody" Varner, who would have celebrated his 100th birthday on January 1. Varner was a seminal figure in Oakland's history, working with founder Matilda Dodge Wilson to help mold the university into the vibrant institution it is today.

Varner's legacy is evident in a multitude of ways. He helped shape the university by personally recruiting and hiring its charter faculty. They shared a desire to help create an innovative academic environment strongly focused on the liberal arts, according to Betty J. Youngblood, Ph.D., former interim president and a member of the class of 1965 at Oakland.

"Chancellor Varner often said that together faculty and students were creating a strong foundation that would lead to the university becoming a major force in the decades ahead," Youngblood said. "Today, we see the continuing fulfillment of the Chancellor's vision."

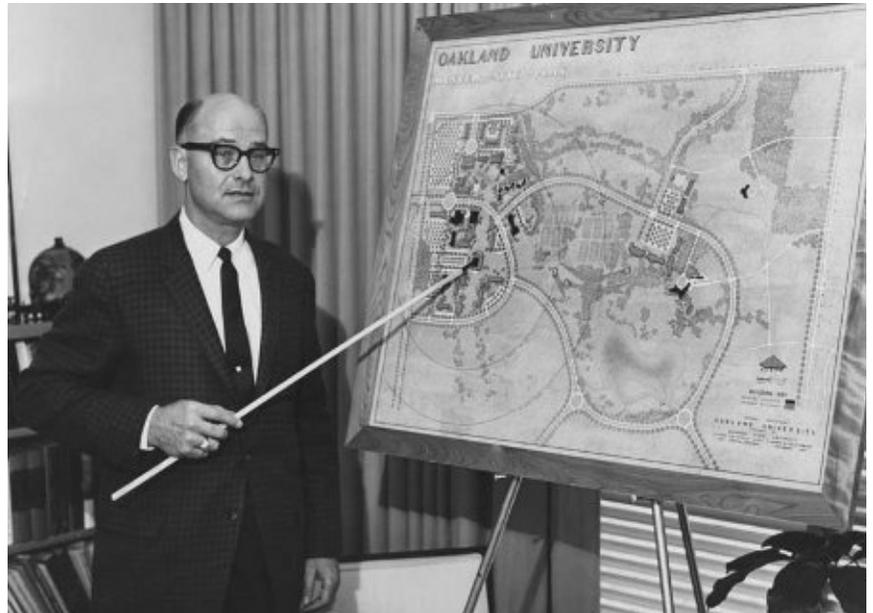
Varner nurtured Oakland through its initial growth spurt, which included the construction of more than 15 buildings and the Meadow Brook Music Festival. During Varner's tenure, enrollment grew from 570 to 7,001 students.

"We understood that our education was going to be second to none," Youngblood added. "We knew that expectations for learning were high. Thanks to Chancellor Varner, serious students thrived in this environment and enthusiastically endorsed the pioneer spirit that was everywhere in the university's early days."

Varner also created the Chancellor's Club, planting the seed for what would eventually become the giving societies at Oakland University. The Varner Society is named after him, and recognizes donors who contribute cumulative gifts of \$5 million to \$9.9 million. As of 2015, Oakland's giving societies reflect more than \$263 million in philanthropy to the university.

In addition, The Durward B. Varner Endowed Scholarship was established in 2000 by the OU Foundation to benefit students in the College of Arts and Sciences. Varner Hall, completed in 1970, is named for Varner and his wife, Paula, and currently houses the Music, Theatre and Dance department, as well as offices and classrooms for the College of Arts and Sciences. A collection of Varner's papers is housed in University Archives in Kresge Library.

Before coming to the university in 1959, when it was known as Michigan State University-Oakland, Varner held the position of vice president at Michigan State. He was also the director of Cooperative Extension Service and assistant professor of Agricultural Economics. He earned a master's degree in Economics from the University of Chicago and a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Economics from Texas A&M University.



Durward "Woody" Varner, OU's first and only chancellor, would have turned 100 y old on January 1.



Chancellor Varner and family at Varner Hall dedication July 9, 1971

Varner left Oakland University in 1970, the year it was granted autonomy by the state, to become chancellor and then president of the University of Nebraska, where he remained until 1977. He was Chair of the Board for the University of Nebraska Foundation from 1977 to 1984.

Varner passed away on October 30, 1999 at age 82.



Chancellor Varner with students