

Robert Underwood

July 13, 2001

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is July 13, 2001. We're in East Lansing, Michigan. I am Jeff Charnley, interviewing Robert Underwood for the Michigan State University Oral History Project, for the sesquicentennial of Michigan State, to be commemorated in the year 2005.

As you can see, Mr. Underwood, we have a tape recorder for this oral history today. Do you give us permission to tape this interview?

Underwood: Sure do.

Charnley: Okay. I'd like to start first with a little bit about your personal educational background, and your personal background. Where were you born and raised, and where did you go to school?

Underwood: I was born and raised right here in Lansing. I find that I'm one of the few people that worked at Michigan State that did happen to grow up in this area. I went to Lansing Eastern High School, and then I went to Michigan State University, graduating in 1958. Then I left the university after graduation for work at the Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois. I did that until 1960 and then returned here and worked for thirty-seven years, retiring in 1997.

Charnley: What did you major in?

Underwood: I majored in--at that time it was called hotel, restaurant, and institutional management. It's now referred to as the School of Hospitality Business.

Charnley: What directed you in that area?

Underwood: Actually, one of my uncles was Robert Linton, and Robert Linton was the registrar at Michigan State University for probably twenty-five years. In fact, Linton Hall here on campus is named after Uncle Bob.

One day in the summer we were having a family picnic and I was a sophomore, and Uncle Bob said, "What are you going to do with your life?"

And I said, "I don't really know."

And he said, "Well, Dr. [John A.] Hannah and I happen to think that the hotel and restaurant business is going to really take off in the next couple decades. Why don't you enroll in the hotel, restaurant, and institutional management school."

I said, "Okay." And that was my guidance counseling, got me into this business.

Charnley: Had you had any experience in working in a hotel?

Underwood: No, not really. Actually, my first job was working at Michigan State University when I was about fourteen. I started working here as a high school student custodian in Berkey Hall, so that was the connection I had with the university. But I worked in grocery stores and gas stations and stuff like that. Didn't do anything in the hospitality business at all.

Charnley: What was the campus like when you first got here?

Underwood: Oh, gee. That would depend on when you say, when I first got here.

Charnley: When you came as a student. Not when you were a janitor in Berkey Hall.

Underwood: There wasn't too much south of the river at that time. The dairy barn was still up across the street from Shaw Hall, and Shaw Hall was fairly new at that time. Brody was pretty new. None of the residence hall facilities that we have south of the Red Cedar River were here. Registration took place in the auditorium. It was the same type of registration that took place for the next I don't know how many years. It was a long time.

Charnley: Until about '92.

Underwood: Yes, until that thing was changed over. Spent a lot of time in what was called the South Campus Grill, on the land currently used by the International Center. There was a whole series of temporary buildings in there, and I think it was called--oh my, what did they call that? The ag school had a short-term program over there for students who wanted to come to Michigan State but had to be home for harvest and had to be home for planting. Short course. It was called the short course area. There were barracks-type buildings over there, and then they had a big building called the short-course cafeteria, I think, or South Campus Grill. So we hung out in there.

I was a commuter student, so I didn't really make a lot of contacts here on campus at that time. Did not live in the residence hall system. As I've tried to encourage my grandchildren, don't do that. We're going to have them coming to Michigan State soon, and they'll be staying in the residence hall system. Because you really don't get the chance to meet very many people when you do that. My college experience was commuting on a regular basis, hanging out with the students and the kids that I went to high school with, pretty much. Then about halfway through college, I got married.

Charnley: Did you live in married housing?

Underwood: Yes, we lived in married housing for a while. I lived in faculty housing then. No, I didn't live in married housing. From 1957 to 1958 is when I was married and we were finishing up. Then I lived in Lansing. But it was smaller, that's for sure.

Charnley: Let's go back to your undergrad education. Were there any faculty mentors that you had, that stand out?

Underwood: One of the standouts that I had was a professor named Lumiansky [phonetic], and I think he was an ATL professor. And then I had Robert Jones, was an accounting professor who single-handedly got me through Accounting 101. I remember that. There were numerous professors that were very helpful. Once I got into what we called the upper school, at that point in time, once you declared a major and you were a junior, senior, then you met up with the faculty members in the School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Management. Bernard Proulx was still a strong influence in that school at that time.

There were other faculty members. A man named Eaton, who taught, I think it was kind of a mechanical maintenance course that you took, because you wanted to be a hotel manager, you had to know about heating and air-conditioning and plumbing and all of that kind of stuff, and he taught a course like that. Those were sort of the standout people that I remember.

Charnley: How was it that you got your first job at Northern Illinois?

Underwood: In 1958, the country was in a little bit of a recession, and all of those jobs that I had foreseen in the bright lights of the hotel and the restaurant business weren't developing. People

were laying off. So I interviewed with a fellow who used to work at Michigan State. His name was Paul Fairbrook [phonetic]. Paul had been the controller over at the Kellogg Center, and he happened to be the manager of food service at Northern Illinois University. I went down there because that was the only job available at that time. I was a manager of the Student Union down there. Didn't know much.

Got to that job and Paul said, "Well, I have kind of good news and bad news. The bad news is that the union manager quit, and is leaving in two weeks. The good news is, you're going to be the interim manager of the union." There wasn't much I could do about it, other than just be a little bit nervous because I was fresh out of school and all of that. I'd had some work at Kellogg Center and experience in front desk and so on, but this was primarily a food service job and I didn't know very much about food service. Took it anyway, and that's how I got down there.

Charnley: A lot of on-the-job training.

Underwood: Yes. The employees of that place really were very good to me. They taught me a lot.

Charnley: How was it that you came back to Michigan State?

Underwood: My wife did not like the flat corn country of central Illinois, or northern Illinois, if you like. Her family was back in this part of the state. So I called a friend of mine who was well known here on campus, named Bob Emerson. He was the manager of Kellogg Center for many years. I had worked for him for the last couple of years that I was on campus. I asked Bob if there were any job opportunities in Michigan, and he found three job opportunities for me to interview for. One was with the Michigan prison system, in food service, and one was a food service job at the Kellogg Biological Experimental Station, KBS. I don't think they called it that

then. And one was working in the residence halls here on campus. After interviewing for those, I said, "Well, Robert, what do you think I should do?"

He said, "I think I'd take the one on campus."

They hired me, really, on the basis of the notion that Dr. Hannah and Emory Foster [phonetic] and Lyle Thorburn [phonetic], who were managing the system at that time, knew that the great leap in enrollment for the baby boomers was starting, and that construction was going to grow.

At that time, Michigan State, I think, had visions of being a mega-university of sixty or seventy thousand. So they just hired me without a job. They just knew that the jobs were going to start coming. So I started out as a food supervisor in Brody.

Charnley: Was Brody new then?

Underwood: Brody was built in 1954, in that area, so it was fairly new. At the time it was touted as the largest non-military food service in the world, and so we played on that reputation for a long time over there.

Charnley: Presumably the food was better than in the military.

Underwood: Presumably, yes, right.

Charnley: What were your duties?

Underwood: When I got there, I really didn't have any, so the manager of the food service said, "You'd better start getting some experience in the various parts of the back of the house." So I worked as a baker for a few weeks and as a cook for a few weeks, and out in the dining room and

in the dish room and in the pots and pans and in the menu-planning, and did some interviewing with students in the dining room about what they liked and what they didn't like about the food service.

I did that for a few months and then the management of Brody turned over. The manager left to go to a job in Arizona and the head building supervisor left to go to work in California. So the fellow that I was working with, Mr. Ted Smith, became manager of Brody, and they created a job called assistant manager, and I got that job. So I wasn't into food service very long before I moved into that.

Charnley: And that was involving supervising an office or offices or both?

Underwood: That job was supervising the crew that took care of the maintenance of the buildings, the custodial and the maintenance of all of the seven buildings in the Brody complex. That was an interesting job. It was a large group of people. There were six or seven supervisors in those buildings. Each building had its own supervisor and its own crew that took care of the public areas. I don't think we were doing any student room-cleaning at that time. I think students were responsible. But there were community baths and showers in all of those buildings, and that's the kind of work that these folks took care of. Then there was summer painting and maintenance and scrubbing and so on.

Charnley: How long were you at Brody?

Underwood: I was there until 1961. Maybe winter term of 1962. I can't really remember. I went over to Case Hall as the manager of Case Hall. I didn't open up Case Hall, which opened up in the fall of '61, I think. I stayed in there until--I think I got there in January of '62, and then in the fall of '63 I opened up Wonders Hall. We were building one and two residence halls at a

time then. In 1961, we opened up Case Hall. In 1962, we opened up Wilson Hall. In 1963, we opened up Wonders and McDonel Hall. In 1964, we opened up Fee and Akers. Gosh, I think Holmes Hall in '65 and Hubbard Hall in '66 and Holden Hall in '67, something like that. It was a fantastic growth period for us.

Charnley: How did the students respond to that?

Underwood: The students didn't know any different. The thing about dealing with the students in the residence halls is that you really only had basically the students for two years. There's a certain thing about the notion of maturing. I've watched it over these thirty-seven years. And that is, you come in as a freshman and you do a lot of kind of silly freshman stuff, and you live in the residence halls. By the time you get to be a sophomore, you begin to think that you don't want to live in the residence halls anymore and that you're old enough to become independent. So you start thinking about moving off-campus.

Well, in those days, if you were a freshman, you had to live in the residence halls, and you may still have to. I don't know what the rules are now. But you also had to live in the residence halls if you were a sophomore, so we had a lot of reluctant sophomores, put it that way. But then as juniors, you have a tendency to move off, and so you have a constant flow of fresh customers, and these are really customers.

In the housing business and in the food service business, you have to make people understand that the reason that they're there is because the students are there. Now, other parts of the university might feel that the students are there because they are there, and that's fine. I don't argue with that. But without the students, the housing and food service operation would cease to exist, so we have always taken the position that we're there to provide service to the students.

So we would have a fresh group of customers every year, and we were housing, in the peak years, 19,000 students, just in the residence halls, a lot of them three to a room. The

university was packing this place, and we had the freshman rule so it was kind of Catch-22 for the kids. You had to live in the residence halls, but there was not enough room for everybody to live in a double, so that meant there was some tripling-up. That in and of itself created a lot of problems. It created a huge amount of problems for the mothers as they arrived on campus and saw how little space the students had to live in.

Charnley: Mothers objected to that?

Underwood: The mothers objected strenuously to that, some of them did, even with a lot, a lot of prior warning. As soon as the parents sort of got out of town, the students began adjusting to one another, and it was not very long before, when it came time for the students to move in to double rooms. There was a certain attrition rate with students here. Often they couldn't decide who would want to move, who of the three students in the room. They had become good friends and had become accustomed to one another, and one another's company and so on. So sometimes it was difficult for them to decide whether or not they wanted to move, and then who of the three would move.

That was kind of the thing that we did from, golly, 1961 right on through beyond 1967, '68, '69. You'd have to look at the enrollment trends to see when that started to fall off. But at that point in time it was a struggle just to get people fed. There were so many people, just getting through each meal period was a challenge. It's much better now, I must say, because there are fewer students, a lot of single rooms, a lot of doubles. Nobody is tripled-up. The students have a ton of options in terms of the meal plans that they have. They can eat anywhere they want to on campus.

Charnley: It wasn't that way in the sixties?

Underwood: It was not that way, no. In the sixties, we did not have multiple meal choices at mealtime. You came through and you had a dinner entree. If it was Friday, you had a meat dish and a fish dish. You had maybe one dessert, you had one salad, and they could have one of everything. I mean, two glasses of milk. So everything was limited. That was the way contract food service worked all over the United States.

Michigan State, through the leadership of a man named Emory Foster, he was called manager of dormitories and food services, at that time, and his most immediate right-hand person was another man named Lyle Thorburn, both of whom are deceased now. Emory was manager of the whole system, which included the residence halls and the university apartments, the Union Building, Kellogg Center, food stores, and those kind of things. Lyle Thorburn was the manager of residence halls, which is the single largest unit of housing and food service. It still is.

They introduced choices, food choices, where you would have maybe two or three choices of entrees, two or three choices of desserts, two or three choices of salads, but it was still limited, in terms of the numbers that you could take. So you always had to deal with the kids who were trying to sneak more food than that, and then you had to deal with the football players who were bigger than everybody else and needed more food, and would always try to take more than, quote, "what they were allowed." Until we moved into the unlimited food service that you have right now, where students can eat anywhere they want to, anytime, depending upon the meal plan that they have, and huge varieties of foods.

It just progressed and grew. Colleges and universities all over the United States learned that it became easier and easier to deal with multiple-choice menus. It was cheaper, cheaper in the sense that if you were serving a roast beef dinner, then everybody had roast beef and so your cost was fixed at roast beef. But if you serve roast beef and macaroni and cheese, a lot of people will take the macaroni and cheese, which is--you know, common sense tells you that's a lesser expensive entree item. So you could combine, you could save, and any kind of waste that you had or other costs that were associated with a multiple-choice menu were leveled off because

people were eating a combination of expensive entrees and inexpensive entrees.

Charnley: Was there less waste with the new system?

Underwood: Yes. There's less waste. There was less waste once people could take all they wanted. Then we emphasized, take what you want but eat what you take, and we reduced portion sizes at that point in time because the students could come back for it. Then a lot of things became self-service.

At this same time, of all of this growth, about 1965, I think we became unionized, and we might have had our first contract in 1965. You'd have to check with the union historians here on campus. When that occurred, then our labor costs began to rise sharply, and so instead of having a person serving salads and a person at every station behind the hot food line, somebody serving mashed potatoes and somebody serving corn and somebody serving the entree, it got very expensive to do that.

And so the industry, and Michigan State, moved more towards self-service items. You didn't draw milk for people anymore; they put the milk in the dining room. You began to put soft drinks in the dining room. I think at one time--it probably still is--students have the variety of maybe fifteen, sixteen, or twenty different beverage choices. You go to a salad bar now and make your salad, and a lot of the places on campus now, you serve your own entree. It's just a big buffet. All of that driven by labor cost.

When I started out, we were paying people \$1.25 an hour and a week's vacation after they had worked five years, or something like that. I don't think any medical benefits were paid at that time. You look at the wages today and look at the fringe benefit package and the retirement package that's paid, and then you look at how much has the room and board rate gone up, in comparison to the cost of having an employee on hand, and you'll see that the cost of the employee has gone up more percentage-wise than the room and board rate has gone up. The way

you compensate for that is to reduce labor.

I helped negotiate some of the first contracts. That was sort of a side thing that I did. Just volunteered to do that, just to help out the university. We were a major employer, housing and food service, had a thousand [unclear] employees at that time. These were not supervisory employees, but this was the basic custodial and food service worker. We had a thousand people. Today I think that's probably close to four hundred. But they work more efficiently. The services have changed. But if you look at their rate of pay now, and I wouldn't quote their rate of pay because I've been away from it so long, I don't know, but it's very high, probably ten to fifteen times more expensive now to put somebody in one of those jobs than it was in the sixties.

Charnley: Were students employed a lot?

Underwood: Oh, yes. We used a lot of them. One of the philosophies that we had was that student employment was a great educational opportunity. Many of the students came to us, never having worked before. Our philosophy for jobs in the housing system was, since the students are paying the room and board fees, then the priority for jobs went to students who lived in the residence halls. You could be an excellent employee, and once you moved out of the residence halls, you lost your priority for a job. Didn't mean you lose the job. If we had all the jobs filled with on-campus students, then you lost your job.

But chances are, a good employee who worked for us for two years would have moved up into a student supervisory position and was living off campus. You couldn't take a freshman student and put them in a supervisory position right off the bat. But, yes, we used a lot of students, and as time went by, as it became very, very expensive to use regular labor, then our student labor increased. But at the same time, a lot of the work went away because of self-service and stuff like that.

Charnley: But students continue to be employed because of financial aid?

Underwood: Not so much, no. That was never a factor. That was never a factor. It's really funny. It's sort of like any other government program. If you get student aid, if you're a department and you get a certain amount of student aid, then you're going to hire students and you're going to use that aid to offset your budget. There is no such offset in the housing and food service because the only funding you get is what you take in. It's a business.

I used to say all of our money comes in through the cash register, and that might be the registrar's cash register, where they're collecting room and board, or it might be a real cash register someplace. But that was our income. We didn't use student aid. We really didn't want to use these aid packages because it augmented our labor cost, and we always thought at some point in time that's going to go away. That's not always going to be there. So if you built your business around a heavily subsidized student labor program and all of a sudden that goes away, then all of a sudden you're in asking the students who come the next year to start paying more money to make up for the aid that has been dropped off. So we never really got into that.

The primary thing was, if you live in the residence halls, you can work in the residence halls, and I think they still have the same philosophy. It's hard to get students to work now. I think it's a mistake.

Charnley: Especially for those who didn't have much work experience prior to--

Underwood: Well, it's a mistake. What's a mistake now is, is that I think students, in high school, I think parents are told and I think students, through student counselors, are told, "Don't let your student work when they're a freshman. They need that time to study." That is the worst advice that you can possibly give, because they don't use that time to study. They watch soap operas and waste it. All you've got to do is sit down and figure out how many hours are there in

a week, how many hours are there in a day, how many hours are you in class, how many hours would you sleep. It's not very much, with college students. And so how much time do you have left over to study, how much, realistically, are you going to study? And the balance, you can work. And there's a lot of time there for that.

Charnley: Your career, after you left some of the individual residence halls, how did that change?

Underwood: In 1963, I was manager of Wonders, and then '64-'65, I got promoted to a job called area manager, because we had grown so big that the complexes had to have some sort of leadership in them. So south campus had four buildings at that time, and east campus had four buildings at that time. And then we had north campus over here, that had always been.

Charnley: West Circle?

Underwood: Yes, West Circle. Then we had Mason, Abbot, Snyder, Phillips, and Shaw. We took those areas and we created a whole series of area managers, and these were line managers to whom the managers of the units reported. We didn't figure that was a full-time job, so each of us had some staff responsibility, and my staff responsibility was to be responsible for the building maintenance for the whole housing area.

Charnley: For all those?

Underwood: For all of them. That wasn't a line management job. I didn't direct it, but I had to be sort of the resident expert, the person that you went to. We had another one of our--

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Charnley: Okay.

Underwood: His staff job was preparing the menus, and he had a staff of people that helped him with that. And then we had a lady who was in charge of training, and her direct management responsibility or line management responsibility was West Circle. But then she had the training aspect for the whole housing group.

Then we had at that time a whole series of snack shop operations. Each big residence hall had a cash-operation snack shop in it, and that was another person's responsibility to be the resource person for the operation of these businesses.

I did that until 1967, and in 1967 we had things like the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, and then we had our first major union contract began to be signed. Supervision was kind of moving towards organizing itself at that time. Emory Foster, who I've mentioned before, decided that he needed a staff person to be responsible for personnel and labor relations.

There was a lot of work going into grievance hearings and all of that kind of stuff, and our managers really didn't know how to deal with unions and union stewards and the union management, and interpretations of the contract, which is a nice thick little book. And unless you negotiated the thing, as I had been doing, you really didn't understand what was in it. It was hard to understand what was in it, so people needed interpretation. So they created job as personnel administrator, and I was the first person in that job. I did that for a couple of years and then some promotions happened and Emory moved up and Lyle Thorburn moved up and I became manager of residence halls.

Charnley: Hannah was still president?

Underwood: Hannah was here until '67.

Charnley: So the president that you had dealing with in this, was this [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]? Or you dealt with the interim presidents, like [Walter] Adams?

Underwood: Oh, yes, I dealt with Adams, because I was one of the university negotiators in the basement of Wilson Hall when the black students took over Wilson Hall cafeteria in 1967.

Charnley: Would you talk a little bit about that?

Underwood: That was a pretty scary experience for us. We didn't really know what was going on. I was sitting in Mr. Foster's office with Mr. Thorburn at the time, and we got a call saying that there were like nine hundred, however many hundred students that kind of came in to take over Wilson Hall cafeteria. So I immediately was dispatched to go over there, and I went over there and the students were kind of running around all over the place. Our staff didn't know what to do and I didn't know what to do. Things finally settled down a little bit.

The whole issue got started because one of our cooks thought that she was being discriminated against. Not many people know--I've never read it in the history of Adams' book or anything like that, but what really happened in that case was, one of our supervisors was accused of harassing a cook, and there was an uncertainty, an unrest in the black student community at that time, and somehow this got communicated, and so the students decided that they would defend her.

The person who was supposed to have done the harassing was referred to as "the blonde supervisor." Well, there was a food supervisor in that unit who was blonde, but it also happened that the manager of the unit was also a blonde, and so the manager of the unit ended up being "the blonde supervisor," and that she and then the food manager of that unit, the next day were

hailed in front of sort of a kangaroo court in the middle of the Wilson cafeteria, with all of these accusations being thrown at them.

It's kind of hazy at this point, but then there was the management people on one side and the employee and the students on the side, and a lot of shouting and yelling going on. Finally it was decided that a group of student representatives, along with a group of university representatives, would meet down in the basement of Wilson Hall center section and work out the details. The demands were that the employees be fired. That was basically what the demands were.

I was with a group that included Emory Foster and our vice president for student affairs at the time, and two black professors. One was Professor Hamilton.

Charnley: James Hamilton?

Underwood: Jim Hamilton. The other one was a professor named [Irvin] Vance, who was a math professor, and the student representatives. We kind of came to an impasse because we were not really willing to fire these employees because they were really not the ones that were responsible. They were taking the heat for this, but they really weren't the ones responsible for it. But as the managers of the area, they had that responsibility. I'm not trying to shirk that. If you're the manager, you end up being responsible for it.

Anyway, we finally ended up going to Walter Adams and saying, "We can't agree. They really want to fire these people, and we can't agree to that." He essentially said to go back downstairs and settle the matter.

And so we went back downstairs and we agreed that the food service manager would have to leave. To me, it was a low point in my career. We reassigned the manager to other duties. Then we had to take on, as a supervisor, as a full-time employee in a supervisory position, one of the black student group leaders' spouses, and so she sort of became the on-site

observer. This person wasn't particularly skilled in the food service area. I don't remember any other concession that we made on the thing, but anyway, it got settled.

It was scary. There was a question of whether the national guard was going to be brought in to empty out this building. That was a decision that the trustees and Walter Adams and the vice presidents of the university at that time had to make. It wasn't made, but that was a consideration. For those of us who were doing the negotiations, those went on twenty-four hours. We were let to go home to sleep for eight hours and then come back and do it again.

Let's see, in '67 I think we were fresh in the middle of the student revolution at that point in time. It was an interesting time to be on campus, I've got to tell you.

Charnley: Was there any destruction of the building at the time, or nothing?

Underwood: No, not really. Not really, no. We opened up the food service and started feeding the students that were in the boycott, or in the takeover. We started feeding them the next day. We locked up the food that night, but we opened up for breakfast the next morning and started feeding them again. We had to take care of the students. No, I don't think there was--a lot of tension, it kind of really was. I don't remember any damage that really happened.

We didn't get a tremendous amount of damage during the student unrest of the sixties, in the housing system. They damaged Demonstration Hall and knocked out windows over there because the ROTC was over there and a lot of the demonstrations took place in the marching field there in front of Demonstration Hall.

I've got to tell you, one of the scariest things that happened to me one time was they had the big demonstration on campus. The SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] were here and they rallied the students to something, and they were doing it over I think at Demonstration Hall. They sent the crowd out to gather up more students, and they sent them from some central location on campus to south campus, and my office at that time was in Holmes Hall. I walked

out into the middle of Shaw Lane and looked down towards the west, and here was this mass of humanity coming at me. I mean, there were thousands of students coming down that road, and they were peeling off and going into the residence halls, and I didn't know whether it was to destroy them or what. But really what they were trying to do is just knock--they went in and knocked on doors to try to get students to go and join them.

Charnley: Increase the size of the crowd.

Underwood: Yes, but when you don't know what's going on and you see that coming at you, it's another one of those real sinking feelings that you get in your tummy. [Laughter]

That was when we had men living on one side of Snyder-Phillips and women on the other. We still had single-sex residence halls at that time. And then during the sixties, that's when the students tore off the doors that separated the two buildings in the basement and decided they were going to integrate and all of that kind of stuff.

My boss, Lyle Thorburn--well, he wasn't my boss at the time; Emory Foster was my boss, but he was the guy that had to negotiate all of that stuff. That was another scary time. West Circle was all women. Mason-Abbot might have been all women at that time. Snyder-Phillips was half men, half women. Shaw was all men. The big halls were coed halls, but they were coed halls by, north Case was women and south Case was men, that kind of stuff. What have you got now? You've got men and women living in the same side of the building and you have men and women living in the same floors now. I don't know. Quite a change. It was quite a change.

Charnley: You were there for a lot of it.

Underwood: Yes, yes. We were there in the middle of all that stuff.

Charnley: After you were director of personnel, then what happened in your career?

Underwood: Then I became manager of residence halls. I think I became manager of residence halls in 1968, and I think I did it twelve years. Around the eighties, I became assistant vice president for housing and food service, and I did that until I retired. I don't know exactly whether those dates are right on the money, but they're close enough.

Charnley: In the seventies and eighties, how did your job change?

Underwood: Well, it was funny. I try to look at it from the standpoint that up until the time I retired, there had been three people who had the job of assistant vice president for housing and food service. Emory Foster was the first one, Lyle Thorburn was the second one, and I was the third one. If you had to divide up sort of the decades, you'd have to say that the builder of the system was Emory Foster. He was in charge when the place was exploding.

Dr. Hannah used to have this big map of the campus in his office, and on it were little models of the buildings that existed. It was kind of like in blue and green or something, or green and yellow, or something like that. Buildings that were built with general fund money were one color, and buildings that were built with borrowed money, which was all housing and food service, were another color. Buildings that were planned but not--you know, in the process of being built, were in a different color. Then there were outlines of buildings, and those buildings went all the way from the railroad tracks to Mount Hope [phonetic], and all the way down Mount Hope and all the way back down Farm Lane. That's when everybody thought this place was going to be sixty or seventy thousand students.

So they started on that building program, and Emory's job, a lot of that job was taken up on meetings with architects and contractors. Everything was tied around expansion. So he was the builder. And then Lyle got into the job when we had these huge numbers of people to take

care of in '67, '68, '69, in those periods of time, when we had the 19,000 students in the housing system. His was kind of a maintenance job, though. Units were new enough at that point in time, where they didn't require a lot of repair, and so his job was concentrated and focused on feeding those students and housing those students, and where are we going to put those students. And then also dealing with some of these changes that were going on, these social changes that were going on. When I got to the job, I had to rebuild them. That was sort of my job, was to redo them.

Charnley: Some were twenty years old.

Underwood: Yes. They were getting to be twenty years old. The vice president of business at the time Hannah was in charge, and Dr. Hannah, when they figured out how to finance these things, the notion was, we're not going to build reserves for major maintenance. What we're going to do is pay them off in twenty years, and when we pay them off, then those dollars that were going into the payment of the bonds would be used to rehabilitate the buildings. And by golly, that's what happened. Other campuses borrowed the money and built the buildings, and built into their room and board they set aside huge amounts of reserves, to take care of building maintenance, which was a smart thing to do at the time.

However, funding, and the cost of running colleges and universities, grew faster than anybody thought, and the funding shrank. And so those schools that had these huge housing reserves out there, those reserves got taken away and used for academic purposes--construction and other expenses. So when it came time to rebuild, there wasn't any rebuilding funds for those and so they were starting to really hurt. Some of those buildings were really getting beat up, and a lot of campuses suffered from that.

The other thing that happened was is that they did it the way Michigan State did it, and that was, pay off the bonds as fast as you can and when you're done paying on the bonds, then use

the money to rebuild. When that money became available, it just got siphoned off into the rest of the university general fund. And so that group of people, those schools that did that were stuck, with deteriorating housing facilities. Not able to bring them up to date, not able to paint them, not able to change out the food services to meet the needs of the new student that's coming in. Because you've got to remember, these kids that are starting to come to you now, in the seventies and in the eighties and in the nineties, heard about Burger King when they were still in their mom's womb. I mean, fast food was then. Things were changing.

Charnley: There wasn't just a straight line down to the cafeteria.

Underwood: No, no, none of that stuff. And the old cafeterias were dull and they were stainless steel and they were uninviting, and the floors weren't carpeted and the furniture was metal. It was like prison service almost. Prison service is like that now. We couldn't stay like that. We had to change these things. You see Shaw Hall over here right now is closed. Two years, gutted, having to be redone. Shaw Hall was built in the fifties, so it's a fifty-year-old building. There was one other thing that Michigan State did right, and that is, when they built the buildings they built high-quality buildings. These buildings lasted a long, long time because of the standards that were used to construct them.

Anyway, to get back to what Michigan State did right, and that was, the plan was, pay off the buildings and then put the money back in, and that's what the housing system has been able to do, through the efforts of Roger Wilkinson, who was the vice president for business here for a long time. The funds that we had once generated for paying bonds would now be able to be funneled back in, to begin the business of maintenance on these buildings. Building window systems had to be changed, heating systems had to be changed. Furniture was worn out. Furniture had to be changed. There were new OSHA regulations and safety regulations that had to be met.

Because of the long-term, far-reaching point of view of Hannah and his staff, and the support from Roger Wilkinson that we received all during this period of time, we were able to make those plans happen. We were able to make that vision that they had work. So my job was to kind of rebuild, start to rebuild.

We rebuilt Kellogg Center. Kellogg Center was built with money from the Kellogg Foundation, but they never pay for maintenance. The foundation will give you the money to build a place, and then it's your baby after that. So the only thing that they did help us with in the remodeling of Kellogg Center was where we added new facilities. We added quite a bit of new teaching facilities for the school of hospitality business, and we added double the size of the Big Ten Room. And they helped a lot in that. They were very helpful in that.

Charnley: Did you have any ongoing relationship with the School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Management?

Underwood: We tried. We tried over the years. We tried to work with them as closely as possible. Emory Foster was a graduate of that school also. Lyle Thorburn was a graduate of the ag school, and I was a graduate of it. We tried, and it was funny, over the years Emory would try and offer to help as much as he could but basically got turned away. I had a good working relationship with most of the directors that they brought in, and I think the relationship still exists as strongly. Had it not been for housing and food services willing to invest a couple of million dollars in new classrooms and laboratory facilities in Kellogg Center, you wouldn't see what's in Kellogg Center right now. Nobody asked for that. They needed a new space. We wanted to reconfigure the building. We found out what it was that they wanted and we built it for them.

Charnley: What were the biggest changes in that renovation?

Underwood: For HRI?

Charnley: Yes. Or even for the Kellogg Center.

Underwood: Oh, golly, that thing started out as, the guts of the building were basically worn out. There were thirteen different air-conditioning systems in the building. The wiring was inadequate for the kind of work that we wanted to do. The kitchen was worn out. So we started out with a rewiring project for \$750,000, which grew to an air-conditioning project, which grew to a Kellogg Center's room are out of date and too small. They were very small rooms and they all had twin beds in them, and it referred back to an era when you brought people in and you put two in a room, two strangers in a room together, and they accepted all of that. The hotel business and the conference business changed. Holiday Inn has big rooms and queen- and king-sized beds, and the industry changed but Kellogg did not.

So we felt we had to, in order to make it pay, and it was losing a lot of money. Kellogg had been a drain on the finances of housing and food service for a long time. So even if we made it break even, we would save a half a million dollars a year. We were losing a lot of money in that place. And so our job was just to get it to break even. Well, you can't get it to break even if you've got a crappy facility. The wood paneling that was in the hallway was built in the early 1950s, so it was forty years old. Everything was old.

So then we decided that we needed to take, instead of 195 rooms, we reduced the number of rooms in the hotel to 165, and we did a lot of one-for-two conversions. We took two rooms and made one room out of it, or we took three rooms and made two rooms out of them. Redid all the bathrooms in there, because they were terrible. Redid the plumbing. We decided that it needed a parking ramp. It had a 350-car parking lot beside it that, when it snowed, became like a 200-car lot, and then people had to walk from the corner, across from Breslin, and a big parking lot there now.

So people that I worked for agreed that a parking deck was appropriate for that, so we built a 1000-car parking ramp on it. And then the Big Ten Room was too small and at that time, Big Ten Room and the Centennial Room was one room. You ran a divider down the middle of it and you could make the centennial room a separate room and the Big Ten Room a separate room. So we doubled the size of that, and then underneath it we were able to put an expansion of a public cafeteria and more conference rooms, a very nice executive training room downstairs. Expanded the HRI facilities down there and gave them a nice dining room, a wonderful kitchen to work in. Actually gave them two kitchens. We gave them a teaching kitchen and we gave them a regular kitchen, and then we gave them a 95-seat amphitheater, with cooking facilities and the mirrors and all of that kind of stuff. It was pretty nice.

Charnley: So you started out as a wiring project.

Underwood: Thirty-four million dollars later, we have what we have now, and we've got Kellogg Center moved from a money loser to one that was able to make its own way, and have enough money to take care of its own maintenance, and I think they're still doing that.

Charnley: What were some of the other presidents that you worked with? You worked with Dr. Wharton?

Underwood: Yes. Dr. Wharton came in and they were wonderful people. When the Hannahs lived there and Adams used the house--I don't think Adams lived there. I think he just used the house to entertain with. The food service in the house was taken care of by the union building. After the Whartons arrived, we tried a couple of different ways of doing that, and finally Kellogg Center took over the catering for that facility.

I think Mrs. [Dolores] Wharton really taught the staff a lot about how to manage and

operate that kind of a facility. It was almost an embassy, kind of. They had a lot of experience with that kind of living anyway, but it just brought a new level of service to Cowles House. And I think some remodeling. You'd have to talk with the physical plant people, because I don't remember when all the remodeling began to take place.

But at that time, there was a young man named Jack Burns [phonetic], was the manager of Kellogg Center, and he got along quite well with Mrs. Wharton. So that started Cowles House towards the kind of food service and housing service that they have over there right now. And all the rest of the people, the interims that we had. When other presidents would come along, and their lifestyle would be different. Each president and spouse lifestyle was different, so they approached their use of Cowles House differently, and so we would adjust to that as time went by.

Charnley: Mrs. Wharton has indicated that one of the things that she did right after her husband arrived, she started going out and staying in the dorms.

Underwood: Oh, yes. Yes, she did that.

Charnley: Were you involved in that?

Underwood: Yes, yes, I remember that.

Charnley: I can imagine getting a phone call saying Mrs. Wharton's going out to Holden Hall.

Underwood: I did that, too.

Charnley: You did?

Underwood: Yes, I did the same thing. I would go out and she would go out and we'd have these grad advisor apartments. I don't think Mrs. Wharton lived with the students, but she might have. I can't remember. But we had these grad assistant apartments in the buildings, and we would go in, and I would go in and stay in those. I would only go if they invited me. I made it known to the students that I'd go out. I'll tell you, when you start doing that, you realize what goes on and how active a residence hall is at one and two o'clock in the morning. That's when everybody is there. The rest of the time it's pretty calm because no one is around. They're off to class or intramural sports. They're eating, they're working, they're doing whatever they do. They're not in their room. Boy, at two o'clock in the morning, especially after the bars close, because a lot of them go to bars, whether they're legal or not, the place gets pretty active two, three o'clock in the morning. Yes, she did that. That was fun when she was able to do that. I think the students really appreciate that, too. What did she say about--

Charnley: Well, no, she said she enjoyed it and I'm just wondering if you had other--

Underwood: No, I meant about her initial immersion into campus.

Charnley: She said students were surprised, and pleasantly surprised, that the president's wife would be willing to spend the night in the dorm, and that sort of thing.

Underwood: She's a very gracious lady. She's a terrific lady.

Charnley: I wondered if that caused any special problems for you as the director of residence halls.

Underwood: No, no. We just did what we normally would do. Our attitude was, we were doing the best job that we could for the students, so there wasn't any way to go in and puff up something. Mrs. Wharton was going to see the housing system for what it was, and she did that. I don't remember that there were lots of changes as a result of her visiting these places. Most of the when faculty and staff would come in and do these visits, they would come away amazed. Some of our greatest--

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

Charnley: This is tape two of the Robert Underwood interview.

When the tape ended, we were talking about faculty visiting occasionally in the dorms.

Underwood: Right. And when they would do that, they would come away with kind of, I think, a renewed appreciation for the kind of work that our staff was doing in the halls. But they also would come away, saying, "I don't what these students are complaining about as far as the food service is concerned because I think the meals were really good."

When you're housing students and the students are--the thing that you have to fight in food service is boredom. Same dining room, same friends, same time, same people behind the line. What can you do that's different? So that was the challenge. They were always trying to do something different. But no, we liked it when those faculty came in. It was good. We listened to what they said, and if they made sense in terms of what it was that the students were asking for, we would either explain what we were doing or make changes. I think that's always been a factor, as far as housing and food service, is people willing to make change.

Charnley: What would you say, the concept of living and learning--obviously, Michigan State was one of the leaders in the--

Underwood: We sure were. That started in 1961, with Case Hall. Actually, it started earlier than that. It started when Hannah was still around. If you can tell me when Sputnik went up.

Charnley: '58.

Underwood: '58. Caused a great panic, I think, in higher education, especially in the sciences, about how could these people be that far ahead of us and what do we do to spur our students into greater success in the sciences. That's when Dr. Hannah, when we would go around with him, and he would say, "You've got all this social space that you've built into the residence halls."

You know, the meeting rooms and other space in the central--and this was in Brody, for example. That just sits here empty during the day, and is only used when the students come back in the evening time, and that was the traditional way that you built them. There's got to be a better use of this space. So this whole concept of living and learning began then when it was, let's take some of these facilities that are sitting sort of fallow during the day and turn them into classrooms. That way, the students don't have to go as far.

We can have classes in the predominantly freshman Brody group of American Thought and Language, and some of the social sciences, that they normally would go to central campus for, let's move the faculty over there. So that all kind of started, and we took space and built faculty offices. They took social space and turned it into classrooms for the daytime. In '61, we opened Case Hall and the whole notion of putting a department located out in the hall started, I think, in Case Hall. We had an assistant dean and they brought faculty over and had offices on the first floor there of south Case Hall. Took the central space, converted it into classrooms.

Wilson Hall came along, and Wilson Hall was the first building we built with the idea, before we built it, that we would have classrooms and faculty offices in it. So if you go into the center section of Wilson, you see the library that--it may not be a library anymore, but there was a

library extension in there. There's a big auditorium in there, there are classrooms all around the central part that were designed as classrooms, and down below that were a whole series of faculty offices built in. That became standard operating procedure for the construction of residence halls all the way through the building of Holden Hall. Brody was converted and you had some classroom space in it. We had various colleges. We had Justin Morrill College, and Snyder-Phillips. We had a college in Holmes Hall, which is now a department. I can't think of it.

Charnley: James Madison in Case?

Underwood: James Madison was created in Case, but that wasn't James Madison to begin with. I think that was something else. It was really ATL and there might have been--I don't know if natural science--

Charnley: Lyman Briggs.

Underwood: Lyman Briggs was the other one. But then James Madison came along and that was mostly pre-law students, and Lyman Briggs ended up being engineering and pre-med students, and Justin Morrill was sort of a--

Charnley: Referred to as the hippie college.

Underwood: Yes, right. You know more about this stuff probably from the faculty than I do. It was kind of the hippie college. Gordon Rohman was the dean of that college, and his concept of an organizational chart was, he was the sun and the faculty and the students were all planets that were revolving around him. That was sort of his organizational chart. It was sort of a picture of the universe, as we know it.

My wife and I took a night course with Gordon one time. It was a fantastic course. It was "How to Broaden Your Thinking Process" or something like that. It was funny. That was after he wasn't dean anymore.

Now, those offered us some really interesting challenges, as far as you had then--you had the management of the housing system. Separate from the management of housing system you had the student personnel people, and that's the still the same case. The student personnel are those people who are the hall directors and the RAs, and they put on the educational programs for the students in the halls. A whole huge variety of stuff that they do, valuable stuff. You already had that, and there's always a little bit of conflict when you have two groups interfacing in the unit. One is supposed to be responsible for it and responsible for the business operation. The other one doesn't care much about the business operation, and has a different role, as far as student education and student personnel is concerned. We thought they should be more sort of the people that controlled the students a little bit. Now you introduce the faculty, and you introduce them as individual colleges, and then when you do that, then you're starting to deal with a dean who now believes that the space is his or hers. It doesn't matter.

So a whole new spin gets put on how is space allocated, who's in control of the space, what should the space look like? What happens to the space in the off season, like summertime? Who is now responsible for furnishing them? Who is responsible for replacing the carpet, or putting the carpet in? Or washing the windows? All of that kind of stuff. So you get into some very interesting personality, I don't want to say conflicts exactly, but you've got different personalities at work, each one with their own mission. Sometimes it's compatible and sometimes it isn't.

But I think Michigan State was way ahead of the curve on living and learning. Subsequent to that, it looked to me like other colleges and universities tried to step in and make a case that they were the pioneers in this, but I don't believe that. I think Michigan State was.

Charnley: And it's still ongoing.

Underwood: Yes. Also at that time, we had, in a--when was it it happened? The legislature lifted the Michigan College of Osteopathic Medicine from its Flint campus and plopped it at Michigan State University.

Charnley: How did that happen? It ended up where?

Underwood: In Fee Hall.

Charnley: And there had been students there?

Underwood: We had been operating Fee Hall as a residence hall, but we had then peaked on our enrollment and we peaked on our enrollment in residence halls, and it started to slide off. We had, at that point, an overabundance of housing. At least that's what was the story, I guess. So we offered up Fee Hall as a spot for the location of Michigan College of Osteopathic Medicine. There were certain facilities that we had that lent themselves to a college of medicine. For example, the kitchen area had plenty of refrigeration and plenty of drainage and plenty of room and plenty of stainless steel, which lent itself to becoming a gross anatomy lab. I only visited that once, I got to tell you. I didn't want to visit it again after it was established. You go in there when they're dissecting corpses, it's a pretty traumatic experience for somebody that--

Charnley: Doesn't see it.

Underwood: Doesn't see it. When the average person sees a dead person, they're in a funeral home and they've been fixed up. Well, corpses, you know.

Charnley: That's not the case. But they were in the cafeteria?

Underwood: No, they were in the kitchen. What had been the kitchen. Again, you've got to remember that--

Charnley: You're used to seeing food in there.

Underwood: Here's a refrigeration that's being used to store cadavers that used to be storing vegetables. So that was an interesting thing. And then they took over the whole building, eventually. We had some apartments in there but then eventually they took over the whole building. So that was another variation on the theme, as far as housing integrating with the academic side of the university. That was an interesting one.

Charnley: When did you ultimately retire?

Underwood: I retired in 1997.

Charnley: So not too long ago.

Underwood: No, no. It'll be four years this next month. Seems longer, and it's absolutely amazing how quickly that happens and how quickly you can become disassociated with your former operation.

I get a publication that has been published by the housing and food service division for, gee, back since probably the fifties. It's called *Serving State*, and in it, it is basically an information piece on what's going in the division of housing and food service, and each one of

the units gets a chance to report on activities in the unit. So there are lots of names of a lot of employees, and part of that is planned that way. I got one the other day and it's just amazing how few people--I used to know almost everybody that worked for us. We had 500 full-time employees, and you would hear the names and you would see them and you would talk to them, and I tried to make a point of going around talking to them when I was in the units. I don't know these names anymore.

Charnley: Have you had any university contact since your retirement?

Underwood: Not much, not much. We still do the athletic events. We don't live in this area now, for the most part. We have contact. We became life members of the alumni association, and we've been to a lot of the Final Four and the Citrus Bowl, and we do connections and hookups like that. I have several colleagues that worked with me that have retired and we live in the same area, up near C_____. So we have a lot of contact that way. Occasionally, I'll come back and visit the old office, but not very much.

Charnley: Who is doing the job that you were doing?

Underwood: A man named Charles Guyano [phonetic] is doing that. Chuck's been at it a long time. He's worked in the system for a long time. He's doing a good job.

Charnley: Was he working under you?

Underwood: Yes. There's a progression. We always promoted from within. We did not go outside. There was no need to go outside the university to find people to promote to the next job. We had this huge system. We spent a lot of time training our people from within, and when

promotion time came along, we had the backup. We had the people ready to move into those positions.

Charnley: In looking back on your career at Michigan State, when you came as a student, or even, you were a janitor, you mentioned, at Berkey Hall, did you anticipate you'd be here almost your entire career?

Underwood: I think I probably did. I never got tired of working here. When I started in '60, I changed jobs. We grew so fast. I always say, maybe it was less a matter of talent than a matter of being at the right place at the right time. But I was in jobs for maybe a year or two at a time. I aspired to be the assistant vice president of housing and food service at Michigan State. We were the largest housing and food service, and still are, I think, of any college service in the world. To me, I thought that was a pretty good job to have, and I was fortunate to keep moving through the system.

I'd have to say, I don't think I was pushed through the system. I don't think I got these jobs because I happened to be there and I was a warm body. But I think I got good training. I think I had good experience. We stuck to the business of not going out to try to find somebody to come in and save the program. The program was very well-run, and each job that I took over that someone else was doing, they had left the job in very good shape. It was not where you had to go in and save anything. You had to go in and do something a little bit different, because of these decades that I described earlier, where you had a builder, you had a maintainer, and then you had somebody that had to start rebuilding the thing, and those were the emphasis that you had to place on it.

But, no, you know, I was raised in a time when working for a company or for an organization for a long time was something that was acceptable. It was expected. It was sort of revered, in a way. I was moving so much and I was being paid well, I was very satisfied with it.

Charnley: I want to thank you on behalf of the project, and I appreciate your input.

Underwood: Thank you.

[End of interview]

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