

AUGUST BENSON

February 16, 2005

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is Wednesday, February 16th, the year 2005. We're on the campus of Michigan State University in East Lansing. I'm Jeff Charnley, interviewing Dr. August G. Benson for the MSU Oral History Project for the sesquicentennial of the institution, which is being commemorated this year in 2005.

As you can see, Dr. Benson, we have a tape recorder here for our oral history today. Do you give us permission to tape this interview?

Benson: I do.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with some general questions about your background, personal background and educational background, before you came to Michigan State. Where were you born and raised, and where did you go to school prior to college?

Benson: I was born and raised in the Detroit area, just outside of Detroit between Detroit and farmland, which was an ideal place to be living and be brought up. Then when I got through high school I would take a few courses at Wayne State from time to time. Well, at that point I had no idea that I would ever be college material; not material so much, but have the opportunity to attend college.

Charnley: What year were you born?

Benson: 1917.

Charnley: What were your parents' names?

Benson: My father was August John Benson. My mother was May Fitzgerald Kennedy. My father was from Sweden, my mother from Ireland. They met in New York, married, and came to Detroit because that was at the time the beginning of the automobile industry and lots of jobs available.

Charnley: So your early years, what school did you go to? Were you at a country school?

Benson: It was the in-town school. A town called Centerline.

Charnley: You're obviously growing up in the Great Depression; you had some experiences with that. How would you say what it was like in your age?

Benson: I was fairly fortunate. My father was a foreman at a plant in Detroit, and he worked all through the depression, so he had a small income coming in. I know we had fellow classmates whose fathers never worked at all during their high school experience. Tough time. I did work

in the bowling alley seven nights a week setting pins to bring in a little extra money during the high school days.

Charnley: What did you do after high school?

Benson: I was fortunate in the sense of my father being a foreman, they would get me a job in that company, Detroit Steel Products. I was a mail clerk. I started as a mail clerk. Well, I was one of the few in our class to get a job. Many of the students went into the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. In some ways I kind of miss that because they all had good experiences. But I stayed with this company for four years.

Then in 1938 we had kind of a recession and they laid off a number of the young people, and I was one of those that were laid off. I finally found another job with another steel company.

Charnley: In that new job, was that in the office or was that on the line?

Benson: Well, in that first job I did get promoted one time from mail clerk to sales expeditor, where I took orders around and got them processed through the credit department and other departments before they were processed. So I got some good experience there. The second one, I worked in the receiving and storage department in a steel company. It was quite educational and it was very useful.

Charnley: Were you living at home at the time?

Benson: Yes, I lived at home until I was twenty-five.

I might add that I had one other job. I was in charge of the office of a small company, a coal company. They managed yard coal and package coal out of—they made coal and bricks and sold them by the ton, so many bricks. It was there I left when the military service came along.

Charnley: How would you describe Detroit at that time, when you were newly graduated and a young man?

Benson: It was very active. At one time, right around some of those times, it was called the City of Champions, when we had football, the Lions, and we had the Detroit Tigers, and then we had hockey. So it was a very active city and I spent a lot of time in it. In fact, I belonged to an organization called Allied Youth, a non-drinking organization whose founder, or major sponsor, was Henry Ford. At one time I was at a dance out at Greenfield Village, and Mr. Ford was there and his wife and friends were there and they participated in the dance. It was quite an interesting experience.

I would say there were a lot of job opportunities. So from the time I was born until maybe I was twelve, we had a good life. That was before the depression hit. So it was a good life.

Charnley: Boom times until the depression. So you followed the Tigers?

Benson: Yes, I did.

Charnley: The heyday of the '36 Tigers.

Benson: I went to their camp down in Lakeland, Florida.

Charnley: Let's maybe talk a little bit about World War II. Where were you when you first heard of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

Benson: Well, maybe I should back up just a little bit and tell you where I was when I heard of the German attack on Poland.

Charnley: Very true. Very true.

Benson: I was up at White Fish Point in Michigan. I had had trouble with hay fever and that kind of illness, and they told me to take a month off, go on up into northern Michigan and just take it easy. I was up there right at White Fish Point. That was an interesting experience. But I came home and then I was ready to get into the service.

Charnley: That was September '39?

Benson: Right. I was in the first draft. I had a low number and I gave up my job and they had a party and whatnot for me. I went down, went through the whole process, and they stamped on there, "Rejected." I had quit my job, that's why I had to go back to—so when Pearl Harbor

came, I was at home and then like so many of the other young people, I was anxious to get into service. I waited a little while for the benefits of the company, who then had slow summer business and allowed me to leave without significant problem.

I had lived at home until I was twenty-five, until I got in the service.

Charnley: So was it the hay fever, the asthma, that caused the rejection?

Benson: No, my vision.

Charnley: It seems ironic that then you ended up as a career military man. [laughs]

Benson: It seems like after that every time I went through an exam I took a good look at the chart.

Charnley: You had a good memory for that.

What about Pearl Harbor? Where were you when you—

Benson: I was at home. It was on a Sunday morning, as I recall. Of course, everyone was shocked. Maybe not everyone. Some of them—and I was fairly knowledgeable, did a lot of reading, and maybe not as shocked as a lot of others.

Charnley: When did you actually go in the service?

Benson: I went in in May of '42. I found in the service that all my work experience I had prior to service was very, very helpful to me because I ended up with an organization, they needed people to run their squadron office, all those details, the morning reports, payrolls, and whatnot. So I moved up to the tech sergeant when I went to OCS [Officer Candidate School].

Charnley: You had had some college, right? You said at Wayne State, some courses?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: But you didn't have a degree yet.

Benson: No, no. There was a program called FERA then, the Federal Education Recovery Act, offered courses, so I had a variety of courses.

Charnley: Was that in the Army Air Corps, or was it just regular Army?

Benson: I went into the Army Air Corps. I went to basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and I scored fairly well on the examinations. Having worked for the steel company, I knew which way the nuts and bolts went and all that stuff, and they tried to make an aircraft mechanic out of me. I held out to see if they'd send me to clerical school or personnel school, and they did. I never quite understood why they were that receptive, but they were. I went to clerical school out at Fort Logan, Colorado.

Charnley: Did you have experience mostly stateside? Tell me a little about OCS.

Benson: I went to Topeka. They had a bomb group that was training crews to go overseas. So I was there about six months, and we were opening a new base down in Dalhart, Texas; that's dustbowl area. I took a cadre out, I was the acting first sergeant, and I helped recruit about thirty people to go on this group. Now, some of the people in the old group were trying to get rid of people and ship them out right away, because I kept trying to recruit other good people to join with them. I went to Dalhart. Dalhart had been a glider base. The winds down there, most of the gliders had gone in, so they changed it to a bomber training base. I was there about six months when my orders to OCS came through.

Charnley: Where did you train in OCS?

Benson: Miami Beach.

Charnley: Was your goal to continue as a personnel officer or did you join a combat unit?

Benson: Well, I was with a combat unit. I got out of OCS, they shipped about two thousand second lieutenants from Miami Beach to Salt Lake City, Utah. When the train got over somewhere like Pueblo, Colorado, they had to wait for another engine to pull them over the mountain. So a group of us in our car, we went down to the hospital there and rounded up as many nurses as we could and we had a big party. We were all full of energy.

So we ended up in Salt Lake City and I was in Salt Lake City twice, the first time as a GI, and I thought I would be sent overseas, sent west, and I was sent back to Topeka. Then the second time I went as a second lieutenant, I thought I would go to Asia, too. No. I and another second lieutenant were assigned fifty troops from that area. They were Hispanics from New Mexico and Arizona, and we were to take them to the port in New York. Another long train ride from Utah. We got to New York, where we'd turn them over to the commander, we'd go and have a good time. We never got off the base. I mean, we had to get them all ready for overseas.

Then we had a long trip because of the transport we were on, it was called the *Empress of Russia*, and we were out of the convoy one day and the *Empress of Russia* had a bad load of coal, and it turned around and went back to port and we all stayed on the ship while they offloaded the bad load. We were on the ship seventeen days when the time it got to Gr_____, Scotland.

Charnley: The U-boats were probably active in that area.

Benson: Yes, they were.

Charnley: What was that experience like in crossing?

Benson: Well, the first time we were in a faster convoy. Second time we were in a slower one. We got to an overseas depot, a replacement depot at Liverpool, and the major and I were sent down to London. He said, "Hey, let's get assigned in London and we can share an apartment and have a great time." Well, I didn't see that I could live with a major, with his income versus a second lieutenant's. Anyway, I had this experience with a bomber group in the States, so I told

him all about this, and I ended up with a bomber group in England at a place called Bedford. It was north of London. I went in there as a brand-new second lieutenant and I reported to an officer named Dave Meyers. He was a captain, and he was very happy to see me because he wanted to get reassigned to a squadron so he could make major. I showed up and I had all the experience from civilian life and was able to apply it both as a noncom and then as an officer.

He assigned me to his office, and my first duty, assigned duty, was mud-control officer. The mud was on the runways and cause real problems. From each squad every day I had to get about two or three men, so there were thirty-five or forty men that were working. Finally they dug a trench around all these paved areas so that if you got off there, you went down and—well, anyway, it did allow me to get to know all the units on the campus quickly.

It wasn't too long when he got me promoted to first lieutenant. It wasn't long after that where he got assigned to a squadron as an executive officer. He had been with the original group when the group left, the group from the U.S. to go to England, so he was able to get his major.

Charnley: That bomber group, was that B-17s?

Benson: Yes. It had a great record. It was the highest rated bomber group in the Air Force.

Charnley: That was all part of, what, the 8th Air Force?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: How long were you in Bedford?

Benson: Not quite two years. I ended up there in September, I arrived, and left in about June two years later.

When the war came to an end, we were all wondering, “Where are we going to be sent?” We might be sent directly to the Far East. We might be sent back to the States for transfer to B-29s, or we might be sent to Germany as occupation Air Force. But I knew when the orders came through and we were to go to Casablanca.

Charnley: Oh, really.

Benson: They had taken two bomb groups, one from England and one from Italy, sent them to Casablanca, deactivated them, and assigned their personnel all across North Africa, Persian Gulf Command, and China, Burma India Campaign (CBI), because they were getting ready at the end of the war to fly all these troops home and the pressures were on. So they had to build up these air bases along the way. I ended up spending time in Casablanca and in Tunisia. So I spent another six months or a year there before eventually returning home.

Charnley: At what point did you make a decision to stay in as a career?

Benson: Well, I thought I’d mark time for a while. I didn’t have the kind of job to go back to. I had some limitations, especially in education, so I just kind of marked time. Everybody else, a lot of people were getting out. It was a mass thing, “Let’s all get out.” A couple years later, I was stationed in Washington in the Air Force, they had many applications, officers wanting to

get back on active duty. But, anyway, I just kind of marked time and they began offering a regular commission versus a reserve commission. I applied for that and I got it. I got a regular commission, and if you had a regular commission, the Air Force, and Army, too, more so than the Navy, they had a lot of officers who did not have college degrees. So they had a far-sighted program, and I ended up being sent to Michigan.

Charnley: University of Michigan?

Benson: University of Michigan. A couple of friends of mine were in engineering, I was in business, and I managed to get my degree in business. I had exactly the number of credits, no extra. So that period right in there and those developments clarified my status that I was going to stay in to twenty, anyway.

Charnley: So you were on active duty during the time when you were in school.

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: And that was different than the GI Bill?

Benson: Yes, it was.

Charnley: The government paid for it, didn't they, part of that, because the idea you had commitment beyond?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: Then in the 1950s you served in a variety of locations. What would you say was the highlight of some of your—

Benson: Well, the highlight, I had a little time I had to serve and they sent me back. They were sending me back to North Africa, but I went through Paris because North Africa and European Command had been combined, joined. I got there and they had a need for an officer, and I just happened to be the right person at the right time. They had a project with three major airlines: Pan American, TWA, and American Overseas Airlines. What they were doing, these bases I told you about spread out, well, all the troops were eligible to leave. They couldn't hire civil service people because they couldn't pay civil service rates enough money to get them to go to some of these bases, which were challenging. So they needed somebody to work with these airlines, so that was my job, project. I worked with the three airlines for around about a year, and it worked out, really well, was challenging, and I got a commendation out of it.

So then I got transferred back to Washington and I served in Washington for a couple of years until finally they sent me to Michigan, University of Michigan. That's where I got a degree and I got a wife and a family started.

Charnley: At U of M.

Benson: Yes. But I had no time for anything but that.

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

Benson: Well, among other assignments, I was assigned to Hawaii. I had a three-year tour in Hawaii, and I had a degree then, and they were making everybody who had a degree apply for ROTC duty because they had some officers teaching ROTC that didn't have degrees. They were anxious to correct that. So I applied, and I had Michigan, Michigan State, Purdue—my wife's state—Notre Dame, all these, and I heard that my name had been submitted to Michigan State, whose program was mandatory, whereas Michigan's was voluntary. Michigan State had a staff of about fifteen officers and Michigan about five. Anyway, I heard I'd been nominated to Michigan State. I had a friend of mine, we'd been stationed in Tunis together, he was a Michigan State grad, ran the Masonic Temple in Detroit, the big temple there, and knew John [A.] Hannah and so forth. So I wrote him and asked him to put in a good word, and he did, and we ended up coming to the state.

While I was here one summer, they allowed you to go to school for summer. I had picked up some credits along the way. Ohio State, see, I was stationed in Dayton, Ohio, too, and Ohio State had an extension program. So when I got here with ROTC, I found I had the equivalent of twelve credits. And then they let you go full-time one summer, I got twelve more, and put it there, I had twenty-four, only forty-five, I needed less than twenty or thereabouts there to get the master's. So I got into it more seriously, and I had a good advisor, a professor named Walter Johnson. In fact, I served for some courses, like independent study, I was advisor to a fraternity; I tried to help them. I was helping. I was going through the ROTC to see who had

academic standing, as they would be eligible for acceptance. So they wouldn't be wasting their time chasing a lot of people who were not eligible. So we had a lot of fun.

We found that the campus and community was such a great place, both the campus and the community, to raise a family and just generally speaking, because when I came to Michigan State, a lot of the faculty had served in WW II. So I got to know a lot of them while I was teaching ROTC.

Charnley: That whole cohort that President Hannah brought in certainly shaped this university significantly.

Benson: Yes, it sure did.

Charnley: So you were a part of that wave coming in.

Benson: We were fortunate.

Charnley: I forgot to ask your wife's name.

Benson: Mary. She's a nurse.

Charnley: What were your first impressions of campus? Obviously you had been at Michigan, but your first impressions back? You gave a little bit of ideas about that. How would you describe the university then?

Benson: I was quite impressed, because at Michigan, that university, then, parts of it were mixed up with the community and whatnot. So I was very, very impressed. We were in the process in ROTC from switching to mandatory to voluntary here at Michigan State. It took some time before this was all worked out, but I got to know quite a few people on campus, and I was very favorably impressed.

Charnley: Air Force and Army ROTC, were they separate or were they together?

Benson: They were separate. We worked closely with them.

Charnley: The focus of the MSU ROTC program and Air Force at that time, was that to get pilots or was it just to get all officers?

Benson: All officers, pilots and non-pilots.

Charnley: How many years were you here in the ROTC?

Benson: I was here four years. Normally it's a three-year tour. You can expand four, and we did. We were just enjoying the campus.

Charnley: Was that the end of your active duty career?

Benson: Close to it. I ended up going to Wichita, Kansas, for two years. I tried hard to get assigned to the Air Force Academy, and had I been able to get that, chances are I would have stayed on for four years, or maybe even retired out there. That country is so beautiful.

Charnley: What was it that affected your decision to leave the service after twenty years?

Benson: Well, a couple of things. I had had a good career.

Charnley: What was your rank at the end?

Benson: Light colonel, lieutenant colonel. I'd gone about as far as I could. The Air Force, you have a situation where you've got flying officers and non-flying. Obviously, as flying is the operation or life of the Air Force, so flying officers usually got into the command positions. They were given all their assignments preparing them for command, like personnel or supply. So generally speaking, we had kind of understood that the chance I would—light colonel was about as far as you could go. But that was pretty good. So that was one thing.

The other thing, I had been fortunate most of my career, but I had a lousy person to work for. Assigned to Wichita, and I was working for a fellow down there who was an alcoholic. I used to say alcoholic asshole. Well, he was. This would make an interesting study, but when the war broke out, they commissioned a lot of GIs that had been in service. Some of these guys had been in service fifteen or twenty years, like this guy. And his best work was at the bar. He never really became an officer in the context of being an officer. When I went down there, I was kind of open-minded, and when they gave me my permanent report, it was low, so I took him in front

of the base commander and they raised it and all that stuff, but that's still is—oh, I was going to tell you about this guy, because he represented a group of GIs, directly commissioned with little or no education, maybe high school.

Charnley: Non-professional by modern standards.

Benson: Yes. And when I went down there, I've got a master's coming down there, and he doesn't have education, he doesn't have a lot of things—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Charnley: This is tape one, side two, of the August Benson interview.

When the tape ended, we were talking about your decision to get out of the service, and you had indicated the difficulty working with one particular officer at your last assignment, and that helped you come to that decision of time to leave.

Benson: Moving on. Well, I was forty-five, and I had counseled a lot of officers who were forced to retire at different points along the line. The thing is, if you're going to have to have a second career, the sooner you get started, the further you are away from fifty. So I sort of applied that to myself.

Charnley: How was it that you ended up back at MSU?

Benson: Well, when I finished my master's at MSU, I had some momentum; I kept on going. I had a great person as my advisor; Walter Johnson was in the guidance and counseling field, a topnotch person. I pulled together a committee and what have you, so I had earned, I think, maybe eighteen more credits before I left here to go to Wichita. So I was well on my way as far as the courses are concerned.

Charnley: For the Ph.D.

Benson: Yes. So I was able to come back here. I came back in '62. '62 or '64? Then I became a full-time student. I completed all my coursework and I had my dissertation. Another chap and I did related—we didn't do the same one, but they were related, and we surveyed and interviewed faculty members at all the Big Ten universities, plus a few others like Wayne State in Chicago and Southern Illinois, and some like that.

Charnley: What was the focus of your research?

Benson: The title of mine was, function of the Foreign Student Office, or advisor, as perceived by knowledgeable faculty members, faculty members who had foreign students in their classes.

Charnley: At that time, did MSU have a large number of foreign students, or would that come later?

Benson: Well, they had a fair number. I had a fair number. I didn't know whether I would stay and get that dissertation done or take a job, and there were some jobs available, and finally my advisor sent me over to the International Programs there because he knew that they were looking for someone to fill the role of foreign student advisor.

Charnley: And you had children by then?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: In talking about some of the administration, after you got your Ph.D., did you continue in the same job?

Benson: Yes. When I took the job in '64, it took me five years to finish my dissertation, because it was a very, very busy job and a lot of unusual events connected with it, a lot of them time-consuming and challenging bits to it. That's part of the reason I took the job; it was something different, nothing routine about it.

Charnley: In those early years, did you have any contact with President Hannah?

Benson: Very little, very little. Dr. Hannah, at the end of the war or post-war, had offered his services of the university, but also, like the Land Grant Association, to Harry Truman when Harry developed that four-point plan. So Hannah was already in there and moving in to this area, and so he set up something that few other universities had at that time, and a lot don't have

them yet; that's an Office of International Studies and Programs. That was Glen Taggart and then Ralph Smuckler were the deans, at the same level of the deans of the colleges. And then he had a couple of assistant deans, and one of the assistant deans was Homer Higbee, who was in charge of international exchange. That involved American students and foreign students and foreign faculty and special projects, a variety of special projects.

So I interviewed for the foreign student job. They'd had a good number of foreign students, but Homer, particularly, wanted to reorganize the office to put it in a more professional role rather than grandma or a mothering means of dealing with the students. Michigan State was going to be, and has been, greatly involved with sponsors; the countries like Saudi Arabia, the Asia Foundation, the International Institute of Education, all kinds; Turkey, Brazil, Pakistan, South Korea, etc. Governments have sponsored—the word *sponsor* is critical because it means they are financially supported and then they can concentrate on their work, and also usually go back home, whereas some that are independently sponsored may or may not go home.

Charnley: So that was the expectation, that they would go back to their own—

Benson: Yes, that's the general expectation, with the reality awareness that some of them wouldn't.

Now, I just brought this along because Homer, in 1961—

Charnley: He was your direct supervisor?

Benson: Yes. He was assistant dean for international exchange, and I had the foreign students side, and somebody else had the Americans going abroad. This is the original foundation of the office, but not just of our office. That was applied nationwide by foreign student advisors everywhere. He had this project from about a year or two, say '60 to '61 or so, funded by one of the international functions here. So that was the first effort to evaluate the numbers and kinds of services that were provided to them and these are some of the results and so forth.

Charnley: How was Homer Higbee to work for?

Benson: Good, good. He had come from Oklahoma, because he was a wrestler. He'd gotten a scholarship here. He was very knowledgeable and very professional, good, stabilized, and interested in promoting, extending, or evaluating the programs at various colleges. It was kind of a mixture. We were determined to treat the students first professionally; that's our first goal, was to get the degree. The priority was a degree, not social life, not all kinds of other activities. Not marriage.

Charnley: Were most of these students undergraduates or did you find many graduates?

Benson: We had a good percentage of our students who were master's, who were graduate, in part because these programs with countries would send young staff members over who had their degree, but didn't have graduate work. So we had many, many graduate students, and many of them had wives and families, so we were not just dealing with the student. Some of the more challenging problems had to do with families.

Charnley: Were the families with the students?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: Maybe talk a little bit about Glen Taggart before he left the university. Did you have much contact with him?

Benson: Yes, I had quite a bit. He was operating on another level. He was not too concerned with the foreign student operation. I think they were all just satisfied that I was taken care of, so they were working on programs with other countries, with other colleges of education, maybe other colleges of business from abroad and, in a sense, staying in the forefront of this whole worldwide educational striving.

Charnley: The students that came here, were they concentrated in any particular college, like in agriculture, or were they business?

Benson: There were quite a few in agriculture, but there was a good spread throughout the campus, because I would get to know a lot of people and they were in all the academic departments. So we had entrée into the department.

You know what I find interesting is we worked closely with the Immigration Office, and you're hearing now, you know, immigration and the whole context, but starting from the beginning, Immigration and the university had a relationship. Now, the immigration people will

authorize the universities to send out documents so students can get visas. So we've got that agreement with Immigration. Now, the universities agree that if something happens, let's say the student doesn't enroll, either he graduates or he drops out or he's ill or something, you notify Immigration that he's no longer fulfilling his feature of his visa. So there is a working relationship. It's not a difficult one.

One of our big efforts was during orientation to try and get the students and our foreign faculty to recognize these things that they had to do to be in good legal standing, renew their passports. Or be aware that if they left the country, they had to have a visa to get back in; left the U.S. or went home. Or in unusual cases we had a few cases where the student went to Canada. Well, they went over on a rowboat—not a rowboat, but a motor boat. And they tried to get back in the U.S., and they couldn't get back in the U.S. because they didn't have any papers. Then they couldn't get back in Canada because they had no visas, so they were caught in between. Well, we would work with the Immigration, say, "We'll see that they get their proper papers if you'll agree to accept them. We'll show you we can take care of what needs to be done."

Charnley: Where was the main office that you worked of, in terms of immigration, that you had to deal with?

Benson: Detroit.

Charnley: The Detroit office.

Benson: We found them, and we made a special effort to work well with them. We had a big conference, a national conference in Detroit, on one occasion, and we always had a lot of foreign visitors to our meetings, to our conferences. We had about two hundred this time, and we were having a meeting that just involved a big business meeting, just involving members, NAFSA members. So what are we going to do with all these foreign visitors? Well, we contacted the Hiram Walker distillery, knowing that they run tours, and we arranged for two busloads, accompanied by the director of immigration, who flew into Canada and back in the U.S. after this reception. It was quite a memorable occasion.

Charnley: What were your dealings with Ralph Smuckler?

Benson: We worked with Ralph a lot and we enjoyed working with him. He was very knowledgeable. We have a major national organization called NAFSA, National Association of Foreign Student Affairs—later they adjusted that a bit, but that's essentially it—and Homer and I had both served as presidents at different times. Ralph later got involved a little bit, I don't think he ever served as president. The association brought together members; they've had the twelve regions like our regions, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Charnley: He was very supportive of foreign students to study on campus.

Benson: Yes, very much. And knowledgeable, too.

Charnley: A recent initiative has been, certainly with President [M. Peter] McPherson, to

increase the number of MSU students that study abroad. Were you involved in that in any degree, or was it mostly foreign students who studied here?

Benson: No, primarily it was foreign students.

Charnley: You mentioned some of the problems with families. Not talking about any individual, but just in general, was there anything that really you ended up having spent a lot of time on, that you either didn't anticipate or in the sixties did become a problem?

Benson: Well, a good number of the families had limited income. We had a very good, very fine group of community volunteers, CVIP, Community Volunteers in the International Program, and they ran a number of programs, lending, English language for wives, scholarships for wives. They do an excellent job. They were able to come up from time to time to help the families. That was an extreme case.

We had some extreme cases. In a period of almost within a month, we had a wife die in childbirth and the child die in childbirth. I went out to the funeral of the child—maybe I did with the other one—but they had a little casket like that, a father and mother opened up the casket at the graveside, spoke to the child before they interred him.

I had a terrible accident and just before Christmas in 1967. A student and his wife and child had come in from Peru and they were with another couple, and both couples had been sponsored by Ford Motor Company. The family with the child had just arrived and the other family were taking them over in a shopping center to buy something to get the apartment set up.

There were five in a Volkswagen. They got hit by a big car on Jolly [phonetic] Road. A big American car hit that Volkswagen.

We got a call. I was down at the hospital and I got in to see where they were working on their child. Three people were killed immediately. The child died and one mother never regained consciousness, and she eventually was shipped back unconscious to Colombia. Now, these were Japanese Colombians. The Japanese had settled in Colombia. So there was contact with the Japanese. In fact, one of the Japanese had gone to Japan to get his wife to bring her back to Colombia. And that was a massive effort with all different dimensions to it. So that was probably the worst. We've had a few of those like a student hanging himself and stuff like that.

Charnley: It sounds like you did have a network that was established there that did help in addition to just the university administration.

Benson: We worked with everybody in the community as needed; the police, the Attorney General's Office, lawyers, and hospitals and what have you. We were the resource person, because the foreign student advisor was the one that carried out these responsibilities of the university. A good example is the Iranian crisis.

Charnley: After the revolution?

Benson: Yes, or with the revolution, where they had our PWs. You had people that, well, they've got that on Trowbridge, the Islamic Center; they were concerned what might happen to that building.

Charnley: All during that time. And there were a lot of Iranian students here.

Benson: They were the largest number. But a lot of them were married and with family. They were not the revolutionary types, but there were some activists in the groups.

Charnley: My daughter was born on January 16th, 1981, and she was there during President [Ronald W.] Reagan's inauguration. Occupying the bed were two Iranian students and they had just had a baby in Sparrow Hospital. So we're watching the hostages being released, and they were there. We didn't have much conversation with them, but I can remember that situation. You must have been dealing with that.

Where was your office at that time?

Benson: In the International Center. It opened up just shortly after I took the job. The office within Student Services, I might have been there a week, a couple of weeks, and then moved right into the International Center, located at the edge of campus.

Charnley: So your new office where the International Center is now?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: Have you been to see the new addition?

Benson: No, I haven't. I know the gal that sponsored that, and her husband, too. I ran into them out in Taiwan and other places like that.

Charnley: How many years did you work at that job?

Benson: Nineteen. '64 to '83.

Charnley: During that time, did you have contact with any of the presidents besides John Hannah? Walter Adams, President [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]?

Benson: President Wharton, particularly, he came here from the Asian continent.

Charnley: He was in Malaysia. Rockefeller Foundation.

Benson: The Asian branch of the Rockefeller. Again, they were sending students to us.

Charnley: Was he supportive of bringing in a lot of international students?

Benson: Very much.

Charnley: So it was an easy sell.

Benson: We had a lot of very talented people here, because in working with the Asian, African,

Latin American Studies Center, we're working over there and they knew a lot of the people that were coming here to advance their degrees.

Charnley: I don't mean to pressure you on statistics or anything like that, but did you have any sense of, from the time when you arrived to what degree, when you left, did the numbers increase, decrease?

Benson: Probably, from I'd say maybe when I arrived we might have had about six hundred. When I left, I think we were close to two thousand.

Benson: Yes, and President [Richard M.] Nixon was fired. We had a reception at the Rose Garden in our meeting in Washington.

Charnley: With President [Gerald] Ford?

Benson: When I first took the job, Indians were the largest population. It varied over the years. We had some big projects in Nigeria; we had some big project in Turkey; and then in Iran, we had a project in Iran, too.

Charnley: Did you work at all with Dr. Axinn

Benson: Oh, yes, yes. And his wife. Sure.

Charnley: I've spoken with him about the Nigerian Project and some of that exchange.

What were some of the situations when, let's say, the revolution started there? There were quite a few Nigerian students here, weren't there?

Benson: Yes, but that wasn't a revolution in such—it was in one of the major provinces. So we had two groups of Nigerians here and we would try to work with them, and did. That was true of other cases where you had the Indian and Pakistani war. And Darfur in Nigerian, and others.

So we tried at those times—and I think we were reasonably successful—to help keep those students afloat. Like the Vietnamese students, AID, the Agency for International Development, that Dr. McPherson was director of, had quite a few students, Vietnamese in the U.S., and when the government fell, under the law that we were funding them, they were no longer eligible. So we had to try and see what we could scrounge locally from departments or part-time jobs, get permission to work.

Charnley: Were you involved in overseas travel in conjunction with your job, or did you do most of it on campus?

Benson: I was involved. I was active in NAFSA, which I mentioned, and I went overseas several times, Taipei and Japan, and whenever I went on traveling for them, I had an allowance from MSU, because they were paying my major travel. That was actually all State Department money, pretty much. In the Far East, I got to Japan several times, and I'd been out there before with the Air Force, and Taiwan and the Philippines and Hong Kong, so in one direction I got over Hong Kong, and the other direction out as far as Saudi Arabia, in the gulf.

Charnley: What would you say, in terms of your experience, that the international students brought to campus?

Benson: Well, they were in most departments, some more than others. By and large, they were serious students because maybe their money was tight or their time was tight; they had two years to do such-and-such, or they only had enough money to cover so long. So that I feel that most of them were very serious students with a strong interest in trying to learn something of our own culture and of our own student population.

I might add this, because when I first took over, we had an International Club, but we all had nationality clubs; German, Pakistani, Indians, Nigerian, and on. This international club for a number of years worked real well and we had great big performances.

Unidentified: [unclear]

Benson: Dances in the auditorium, and there was competition for prizes. Dr. Hannah and his wife, bless her heart, she came to a lot of activities when he was gone.

But that ran into problems, because Israel had their map up and the Palestinian students had their map up. Then we got into a situation where Iran had about five different groups of students—and I say *students* with some hesitation—but pretty soon it got to the point that whoever got himself elected to do some university business was not interested in promoting the International Club as much as—in fact, one time we had a former marine, American marine, as president of the International Club. I thought to myself, well, I couldn't dictate who was being

elected or who was running or any of that stuff, but I found that quite unusual because it would turn off others.

Charnley: So the politics and political problems certainly, you saw evidence on campus.

Benson: During those times when we had—

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Charnley: This is tape two of the August Benson interview, side one.

When the last tape ended, we were talking about the International Club and you were saying that some of the international problems spilled over with that, saw evidence of that. What do you think the benefits were for MSU students?

Benson: Well, there were many opportunities for them to relate to foreign students, in classes or we had a wide range of financial and cultural activities. We had one big international festival with displays of all of their cultural artifacts, but then you had individual ones. Now, of course, I think that many of the American students began thinking of overseas tours themselves, began to look more carefully at the resources that were available here.

Charnley: Do you know at which point the university started emphasizing study abroad, or had they done that earlier for MSU students to study abroad?

Benson: I think that's been going for quite a while. Now, I know that the president gave it added impetus. In fact, maybe that represented additional funding, which has always been a limiting factor in American students studying abroad. We ran a comparison one time, we were talking about foreign students, American students, foreign students were primarily graduate students and primarily male. American students going abroad were primarily undergraduates and primarily female. The relationship was limited.

Charnley: I think that's continued, it really is. My daughter had taken a study abroad and there were twenty women and three men when they went to England and Scotland a few years ago.

How long did you ultimately work here at the university?

Benson: Well, I first worked here from '56 to '60.

Charnley: In the ROTC. And then on staff?

Benson: Then from '64 to '83.

Charnley: Were you teaching any courses during that time?

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: What were the courses you taught?

Benson: I wasn't teaching in regular courses, but I was filling in for a number of the professors in guidance and counseling in the College of Education.

Charnley: What was your main interest in your teaching?

Benson: It was primarily guidance and counseling area, but also management, because I had taught management in the Air Force program.

Charnley: Did you do anything in business, at business college?

Benson: Yes, I took a minor in management there when I was getting my master's in guidance and counseling. In fact, I had the opportunity to teach there and I didn't take it because I felt I was overcommitted, trying to finish my own, and a job. First of all, orientation for students involved orientation while they were still home before they came over so they know what to expect, and then on arrival so that they're fairly informed. But we tried to do something like that with the faculty here to inform them and advise them of some of the important features of foreign students being here.

Charnley: So you oriented MSU faculty.

Benson: Yes. Some of that had to do with money, lending money to students, and talking to the Immigration Office. They don't want all the faculty members calling them and what have you. So we did the best we could. We could have done more, but—

Charnley: Talk about what were some of the ways that you and your family were involved in local community activities.

Benson: Well, I should say I have another career after leaving the university. I'm in investing. I had been investing for about fifty years, but I never had time to work at it till I retired from the university. I formed two investment clubs, one aggressive and one conservative.

Charnley: This is after you left the university?

Benson: Yes, and then I did my own investing and invested some for my kids. I've been working on that more or less full-time. It's been rewarding.

Unidentified: And most of those in the investment club are affiliated with the university.

Charnley: So you kept those contacts.

Benson: Larry Summers [phonetic].

Charnley: Yes, I've interviewed Dr. Summers.

Benson: It was a great club. It was all professional people; we could all afford \$100 a month. It built up to a half a million dollars, and then the market went down, you know. But it's been building back up again.

Charnley: Well, it never would do that, would it? Go down?

Benson: It goes down, that's when you have some opportunities.

Charnley: So you did it as recreation and also as an investment.

Benson: No, not really recreation, but I enjoyed it because I had an interest in business.

Charnley: Were there ways that you were involved in local community activities, besides the job?

Benson: Yes, we went to St. Thomas Aquinas, have been there for the same number of years plus. I got involved with Jack Shingleton [phonetic]. I managed his campaign when he ran for the board.

Charnley: Oh, you did? A reluctant candidate at first, as I recall what he said.

Benson: Walter Johnson and I, the fellow I mentioned, we were sitting in a meeting where Jack Shingleton was talking, one of the speakers. We were talking about the board. I said, "Jack,

wouldn't he make a good potential board member? Because he really knows the campus," and so forth. But everybody who ever graduated from Michigan State has gone through the Placement Office, so they know when his name shows up. We joked at that time, because I think the governor only won by about eight thousand votes the first time he ran, and those votes were probably what Jack brought in.

Charnley: That's Governor [John] Engler.

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: Have you had any contact with the university since you've retired?

Benson: Yes, I have. I maintain a contact with my successor, David Horner, and I have met his successor, Briggs, I think his name is.

But we have moved. That's a critical factor that's changed. We're in Chicago.

Charnley: You left the East Lansing area.

Benson: Yes. We have two daughters in the Chicago area.

Unidentified: You kept your football tickets.

Charnley: You kept your football tickets. [laughs]

Benson: Yes.

Unidentified: We came all the way from Chicago to watch the Spartans.

Benson: I got to know Judd Heathcote [phonetic], because when he first came here, he had some foreign ballplayers. He had a big Swede who was seven foot tall; he only stayed one year. But he had some others, and they all came through my office, as all the hockey players from Canada did.

Charnley: So you had some contact with Coach Heathcote.

Benson: Yes.

Unidentified: And the Development Fund; you're a contributor to that.

Benson: Yes, that's right. We participated in John Hannah's memorial.

Charnley: So you've seen the statue?

Benson: Yes. We came for it.

Charnley: In looking back at your career here at Michigan State, is there anything that stands out as maybe being most important? I know it's a tough question.

Benson: We covered a lot of ground. I think the thing that we almost determined was that we would be considered part of the academic process and work with the professors and department chairmen and deans, even, and sometimes when you work with a professor, he's usually department chairman. So we did a lot. We could have done more, but we did a lot to maintain our relationship to the academic side of it.

I can think of a number of times when I've called a dean or assistant dean where they've dropped a student and finally find out that, well, there are avenues where he could be retained and given a further shot at the degree. So I felt good about our relationship with the departments and the other offices on campus because we spent a lot of time working with the Financial Office, with the Housing Office, and a range of others.

Charnley: In your travels since you've retired and left the university, have you encountered any students that either you had some influence on their experience here, or did you encounter any?

Benson: Well, I encountered more earlier when I was abroad, like in Mexico City and Mirada down in the Yucatan area, but also in Taiwan and Taipei and Japan and Philippines. We actually met with students. In fact, one of the areas that is left undone and that we would like to see more done is with our foreign alumni. It never has been raised very high on the order of priority, and we all felt that we could, by working with professors who were going abroad, that there could be a contact when they get over there, because we've got a lot of people who do go abroad. Of

course, it's hard, they try and use foreign alumni to raise funds, and that's a tough one, very tough.

Charnley: Did you anticipate, when you came to Michigan State, that you would be here for as long as you were?

Benson: No, I sure didn't. But after we'd been here a couple of years, well, I said when we left, we said that if we came back, and if we could find a decent job here. And this job just happened to come up, and Homer Higbee was a fine person to work for. We related very well. Ralph Smuckler was another one. And all the social life.

Charnley: Sounds like you found that decent job.

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: I'd like to thank you on behalf of the project, and really appreciate your insight and perspective. Thank you.

Benson: Michigan State essentially has been a leader in this foreign student business and, as I said earlier, in trying to focus more on the academic, not so much on social activities and stuff like that. And then in the form of organization, also, and in their ability to try and work with immigration instead of against immigration. So State is—from this part here, because this

became the bible, the first bible, for all foreign student advisors. And Homer was like that first prophet.

Charnley: Sounds like it was seminal work.

Benson: Yes.

Charnley: Thank you.

[End of interview]

Index

Axinn, Dr., 31

Benson, August

- Early work experience, 3, 4
- Early years, 1
- Educational background, 1, 13, 35
- Experiences during the depression, 2
- Investing career, 36
- Local community activities, 38
- Member of Allied Youth, 4
- Michigan State University, 1956-1960, 1964-1983, 34
- Military service, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
- Office of International Studies and Programs at Michigan State University, 29
- Overseas travel, 32
- Parents of, 2
- Participation in John A. Hannah's memorial, 40
- Relationship with David Horner, 38
- Relationship with Glen Taggart, 23
- Relationship with Homer Higbee, 22, 41
- Relationship with Jack Shingleton, 38
- Relationship with John A. Hannah, 21
- Relationship with Judd Heathcote, 39
- Relationship with Ralph Smuckler, 25, 41
- Student at Michigan State University, 14, 19
- Student at University of Michigan, 12, 13
- Teaching ROTC at Michigan State University, 15
- Wife of, 15

Benson, August

- Master's dissertation, 19
- Substitute teaching at Michigan State University, 35
- Teaching ROTC at Michigan State University, 16

Briggs, _____, 38

Detroit, Michigan, 4

Ford, Gerald, 30

Hannah, John A., 14, 15, 21, 33, 40

Hannah, Mrs. John A., 33

Heathcote, Judd, 39

Higbee, Homer, 21, 22, 25, 41, 42

Horner, David, 38

Johnson, Walter, 14, 19, 38

McPherson, M. Peter, 26, 31

Michigan State University

- Campus, 16
- During World War II, 14, 16
- Foreign students, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34

International Club, 32
Office of International Studies and Programs, 21, 22, 27, 28
Relationship with Immigration Office, 24, 25
Study abroad program, 34
Substitute teaching at Michigan State University, 35

Smuckler, Ralph, 21, 25, 41
Summers, Larry, 37

Taggart, Glen, 21, 23

Wharton, Clifton R. Jr., 29