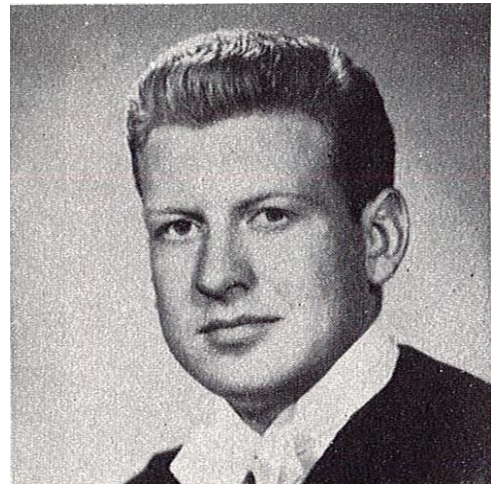


Ontario Agricultural College,  
University of Guelph  
**Alumni Oral History**

**Dr. Clayton Switzer**

BSA 1951, MSA 1953

Interviewed by Grace Jaklitsch



**What year did you start at the OAC?**

I came here in 1947 from a farm near Strathroy, a little town near London. I had been accepted at Western University as well as at OAC, but the reason I came to OAC was that I'd been here earlier on, in a potato club competition, and I loved the campus and the city. So, when it got really down to making a choice, I decided that going to Guelph was a better choice than going into London to Western.

The other thing is that at that time (and you have to remember this was 1947), at Guelph I was offered a \$50.00 per semester scholarship. It was a big deal because we only had to pay, believe it or not, \$9 a week for board and room. So, \$50.00 went quite a ways in 1947. I was admitted to Western, but they didn't offer me any scholarship. So that \$50.00 helped make the decision.

**So, we have what year you started at the OAC, where did you grow up? You said Strathroy?**

We had a farm near Strathroy.

**And when did you graduate from the OAC? You did your bachelors and your masters here, right?**

I received my bachelor's degree in 1951 with a great group of guys that have kept together all these years. We had our 70th ANNUAL REUNION in 2021, and we decided that was probably enough because there were only eight of us that showed up.

I received my master's degree IN 1953 and then I went to Iowa for my doctorate.

## **We talked about what made you decide to go to the OAC (you had a scholarship and liked the campus over Western), was there anything else that contributed to the decision?**

Well, I think just the place, you know, Guelph was a great small city in those days. When I moved in here, there were only 25,000 people living in Guelph. I'll always remember that sign on the highway as my dad drove me into town that indicated that 25,000 was the population.

## **Did you visit the campus before you started?**

Yes, I was up here a couple of times with Potato Club work.

## **And what was it like at the time?**

Well, small. The big event here in June of each year was a big convention of the Women's Institute of Ontario. There would be several hundred ladies here for the weekend, and I happened to have been here during one of those and thought that was pretty impressive, all these — generally they were farm wives — who came as members of the Women's Institute.

## **Did you have family members or friends that had a connection to the school?**

Not really, no. I'm the first member of my family that went to university. Back in those days, in the 30s and 40s, there weren't a lot of people who grew up on farms who actually went to universities. Most of the young people that I went to public school and high school with ended up staying in their own community and they were lucky enough if they had a high school education. That's just the way it was.

## **What did you major in?**

I came to OAC to do biochemistry. OAC had an interesting system in those days. In order to sign up for a particular major, you had to go and visit the department and have a chat with the head of that department. I started out going to chemistry. Then I went to horticulture. Then I went to botany and the head of the botany department, who later became president of the university, Dr. JD MacLachlan the 1st President of the University of Guelph. He sat me down and said, "Well, young man, why are you interested in botany?" And I said, "Well, I'm really not. I'm interested in chemistry". He responded, "You can take plant physiology. That's mostly chemistry. Chemistry of plants."

He talked to me for a whole hour, and I came away from that with a lesson that I tried to use all my university life and that was: if a student came in to see me, I should give that student all the time in the world -- do my best to give them as much advice as I could. And it all went back to Dr. MacLachlan.

The system in those days was everybody in the OAC took the same thing for the first two years. After the second year, you went into your major. So, I didn't go into a major until third and fourth year.

### **Do you remember any of your professors?**

Oh yes, there were several of them. There was a botany prof we called Slippery Sid. He used to take us on field trips, and he was called Slippery Sid because the students couldn't keep up with him. He was always disappearing ahead of us somewhere. And of course, I remember Dr. McLaughlin, who was just a wonderful teacher too.

### **Did you have a favorite class in particular?**

Yes, plant physiology. It turned out to be my major and it contained the biochemistry that I was looking for. I guess it goes back to high school days when I had a really good chemistry teacher who turned me on to chemistry, biochemistry particularly. So yes, that was my favorite one.

### **What was it like when you first arrived on campus?**

It was very quiet. I guess that's the best way to put it, but we weren't on campus very long when we had to undergo initiation, and initiation in 1947 was a pretty tough event. The senior classes, shall I say, put us through our paces in many ways. They made us do physical things, but we had to do some demeaning things too, like polish their shoes if they asked us. That was all part of the tradition of initiation. And we had to wear silly little hats and ties so that the freshmen were differentiated from everybody else.

### **Where did you live your first year, and did you enjoy the experience?**

We lived in what is now called Johnston Hall. In those days it was called the Administration Building because that's where the president and the senior administrators had their offices. I was in a room with three others, 2 double bunk beds and two desks. There really wasn't room in that room for all four of us to be there at the same time, so any studying that we did, we did in the library, now Massey Hall.

### **Were you involved in any extracurriculars on campus?**

I was always involved in athletics. And then I got involved in student politics soon after I got here. I was elected to the executive of our class, the class of OAC 51. I was Secretary Treasurer as an undergrad and at our 70th reunion I was still Secretary Treasurer, so I was Secretary Treasurer in the class of 51 for over 70 years.

### **Wow! So, you said you were involved in athletics. Did you play anything in particular?**

Yes, I played pretty well everything. I played intramural football, but basketball was my forte and I ended up playing on the intercollegiate team. At the end of our first year, we were declared Dominion champions because our team had won Eastern Canada at the intercollegiate level and my coach John Eccles, who was a well-known figure on the campus, challenged the Western Canada winner and they didn't respond. So, we were declared Canadian champions.

### **And John Eccles would be the one that the center is named after.**

Yes, that's right.

### **What was the social life on campus?**

There was the Macdonald Institute in those days. When I was in First year, there was not a degree course at Macdonald Institute. The girl that eventually became my wife was going to Western. When I was in my first year here, she was in first year at Western. When I was going into second year, they started a four-year program in household science here at Guelph. Dorothy transferred into this program from Western and started into the first year. So, for the next three years she and I were dating constantly. When I graduated in 1951, she still had a year to go, but we got married that summer. So, Dorothy still had one year to finish up her degree while I was starting my Masters.

### **And what did you do for fun and relaxation on campus?**

Athletics was a big part. I don't remember what else I did. They had the odd dance over at Macdonald Institute, the Aggies were always invited to that, of course, but there wasn't really much going on on campus. There was no University Center or anything like that. So, any, as you say, "fun and recreation" probably was downtown, going to a movie, or dances at the YMCA that we would sometimes go to.

### **Has downtown Guelph changed a whole lot since then?**

It's now a city, in those days, it was like a small town.

## **Did you feel like a part of the OAC?**

Yes, I think that's a very important question because that was one thing that was really important in those days, and I guess it was why initiation was considered to be so important. The idea was to get you indoctrinated into this college that you were now a part of this wonderful institution called the Ontario Agricultural College. And quite frankly, I think that's the reason that my class hung together and had yearly reunions up until our 70th year of graduation in 2021.

Also, I think part of it was related to living in residence. The majority of my classmates lived in residence. There were some of the older men who had been in the Army or the Navy who'd been married, and of course, they lived off campus. I just used the word indoctrination, but whatever it was, we thought of our class as one big family which persisted all through our lives.

## **When you lived in residence, did you just live there for the first year or did you live there all four years?**

I lived there until 1951. Yes, I was in residence all four years. Started out in Johnston Hall for two years and then we lived in Watson Hall. In fourth year, we lived in Mills Hall.

## **So you moved right from residence and then you got married and presumably moved in with your wife.**

Yes, we rented a little place over on University Ave. It was really close to the university, because she still had to do her fourth year and I was enrolled in my masters.

## **What were your favorite memories of your time at the University of Guelph?**

I guess we've covered a lot of that already. Just the interaction with my fellow students and the athletic events I was involved in and the memories of some of the classes I went to, which were invigorating in many ways. Some of them were boring, as I'm sure you've already found out, but we had a lot of good fun because we lived in residence.

## **You mentioned field trips. What kind of field trips were you going on?**

We went to some of the local farmers who were gracious enough to allow a bus load of students to come and see what they were doing. I don't remember any of their names now because that's, like I say, 70 years ago. But there were several farms around Guelph that were very good and later when I became Dean of the College, I was happy to be able to recognize some of these people that were still doing it at that time. They

were inviting students from OAC to visit. So, when I was in OAC administration we had the opportunity to set up programs to recognize these people.

**So we've been speaking about your first four years. Did anything change during your masters, as you weren't living on campus? Did you still see a lot of the same people or have that same camaraderie with your fellow students?**

You have opened an interesting area here. When I was in fourth year, there was no place on campus where you could go for a cup of coffee or lunch or anything like that. You had to go off campus. There was only a little place called Slingers Drug Store at the corner of Gordon Street and College that provided light snacks.

Because of this, the OAC student council made arrangements with the college administration that if we could dig out the cellar underneath Massey Hall, we could have a coffee shop there. In the fall of 1950 and the winter in 1951, a group of us, using shovels and wheelbarrows, took the soil out from below Massey Hall. By the next year, when I was doing my masters, this area had been converted into a coffee shop.

**Wow.**

For years, it was the only place on campus one could go for a coffee. You asked if there was anything different—the biology building where I was doing my master's research was right across the street. So, the students would go with some of our professors to have coffee at our new coffee shop.

**That's determination! You knew what you wanted.**

It was a big deal! Of course, it took a lot of people to do it and some cooperation from the powers-that-be to allow us to do it. When finished, it was run by the Student Co-op for many years. You asked what happened when I did my Masters. That coffee shop was one place where we students got to meet with some of our professors because we could go there and have a coffee with them, which was less formal than being in a classroom.

**Did you find that it facilitated student interactions more too? Now that you were living off campus? I know that when I'm living off campus next year, I'm going to have to find new ways to meet people and hang out with people because I'm not going to be in residence. So, did you find that having a place like that really helped?**

Definitely. Yes, definitely.

**Wonderful.**

There are many such places on campus now you'll be able to find.

**I will say I'm very grateful to live somewhere that has the best, supposedly the best university food in all of Canada. I think my favorite spot has got to be the Bull Ring for sure.**

Well, when I was here, the Bull Ring was, as the name might suggest, a place where students went to learn how to judge animals. They brought the cattle in there and the pigs and sheep. The students who were in animal science courses, that's where they went to do the judging.

**Yeah, I've heard it's gone through quite the transformation. I was talking to somebody, and they were speaking about how it used to be really more of a pub setting, and that's kind of why Guelph got a party school reputation, because we had Aggie pub in the Bullring, and it was rowdy. Now it's like a lovely little cafe with sofas, and which I quite appreciate because it's got to have the only comfortable sofas on all of campus.**

I was in there last year. The class of OAC 78 had their 45<sup>th</sup> reunion last year, and part of it was in the Bull Ring. I was invited to join them and thus had an opportunity to see it as it is today.

**Yeah. And I've heard that since a couple renovations, the Aggie Pub has moved to the basement of the UC. I have yet to go, but I've heard it's a blast.**

Yes, and you should go there sometime. And there is a wonderful renovation in Johnston Hall. They now have a place there where alumni and undergrad students, grad students, and faculty can all come together and visit, but also, it's going to be a Heritage Space where people like me that accumulated books and memorabilia over the years can give it back so that students of to-day can learn about OAC and the University history.

**Yeah, I would definitely appreciate that. Alright just a couple more questions to go. We're moving pretty fast actually.**

Things go fast when you're having fun!!

## **Exactly. You mentioned you are still friends with the people you went to university with?**

Those of us that are left, you know, we started out with 180 students in our class and now there are fewer than 20 of us left. Incidentally, you might be interested in the fact that of that 180, there were only three women.

## **Wow.**

Now, when you go into classes at the OAC, I am sure that at least 50% of the students are women. We started out with 180, and about 40 of the 180 had been in the armed services. Those men were all four or five years older than the rest of us, and they're mostly all passed on now. The average age right now of my classmates would be 95/96, so they're not too many. And as I said, there were only eight of us who showed up for the 70th reunion.

## **How wonderful that you've stayed in touch. There's just two questions left! You don't have to answer this one if you don't feel comfortable, but did you go through any tough times during your university years and what caused the difficulties? How did you deal with them?**

No, I didn't. I think that my six years as a student at OAC were some of the best years of my life. I was healthy. I had no monetary concerns because our expectations were very low. One didn't need much money because nobody else had much! And I was able to find the odd job around to pick up a few dollars.

I enjoyed the camaraderie with my fellow students and, of course, with my wife-to-be, also being on campus. We had a good social life, going to movies and things of this nature. So no, I have really no negative feelings about my six years as a student on this campus. Nothing but positive memories.

## **Did you have a favorite movie that you saw with your friends?**

Casablanca, of course!!

## **I can't say I've ever watched it. Maybe I'll have to.**

Yes, you must watch Casablanca. I've seen it so many times. In those days there were two movie theaters downtown, the Odeon, and I forget what the other one was. We went to a lot of movies because there wasn't much else to do!



**Makes sense. If I didn't have my phone, I would certainly be going to movies more often.**

We didn't have phones and those days---not like the ones we have now.

**I definitely spent far too much time on it. I'll have to work on getting out, I think. Think I'd like to visit the Arboretum more? Spend a little more time outside for sure.**

Yes, you should do that. The person that's in charge of the Arboretum now is very open to visitors and you should go over there and look. It's a nice peaceful place. The other place that you might want to frequent a little more is the Conservatory Greenhouse and Gardens just outside of the UC.

**Yes.**

There's a greenhouse there. And then there are four different gardens, one of which was sponsored by my class of OAC 51. So, I hope you might go over there sometime and take a look around. There are benches and other places to sit. When my Class of 51 and others were involved in planning that area, we thought of it as a place where students could go and lay back and relax. We thought of a space where students could get away from their regular activity and relax with the plants.

**Well, that concludes all of the scripted questions! Is there anything else that you really want to talk about your time at the OAC, or any fun stories? I've heard a couple stories about pranksters. I'm not sure if you were about one?**

There was always a thing where the OAC students pulled some kind of a prank on the Dean and the years that I was in the Dean's office, a couple of times, I was kidnapped.

**Kidnapped! Oh my gosh.**

You know, there were no masks like you're wearing today, but several masked people came into my office and forcibly took me with them.

**What a prank!**

Yes! But we ended up over at the English pub. And of course, then all the masks came off and we shared a beer or two!

**Wow.**

But OAC students have done some interesting things. One of the OAC Deans that followed me came to his office to find it full of bales of hay. When he came in in the morning, he could hardly get in the door!

**Wow. Yeah, definitely a different side to student culture than what I think we see now. The engineering students still have a lot of those initiation kind of events, but the general populace maybe less so. Today, we paint the cannon and rub the beak of the Gryphon for good luck. Was there anything like that?**

In general, I think it was much quieter. However, at one time I recall seeing a car on the front steps of Creelman Hall. But I do not remember there being the kind of partying that I understand sometimes happens over on Chancellor's Way.

**I was at one of those, but I don't think I need to go again.**

Oh, you know what I speak of, then. I don't remember anything about those kinds of things. I'm not suggesting that OAC students didn't drink beer, but the situation was that they would go downtown and drink beer at one of the local places. Even Homecoming weekend was very quiet compared to now.

**Yeah, well, definitely. Homecoming seems like one of those traditions that has grown in intensity.**

I get the Waterloo Record newspaper. And they write up about some of the things that have gone on over there.

**Yeah, the party life is something truly interesting about university. There's not many other times in your life where it's expected for you to go a little bit crazy. Weird social phenomenon.**

Yes, it is. And you know, as I say, going back to the years I was in the Dean's office, I always met with the OAC freshman class to welcome them. In my little speech I usually included a bit of advice along the lines of, "now, look, gals, guys, this is your first time away from home. You're now on your own. and you've got to accept responsibility because you don't have mom and dad here to look after you." I don't know how successful it was, but it really is so true. You've presumably lived at home when you were going to high school, and it's just a whole new experience once you get away from

home. Particularly when you are in residence. You have to learn that it's your life and you don't have to follow everything that the person next door does.

**What was it like to watch campus evolve? Because you can see that a lot of the buildings were built in the 1960s when the university was started. What was it like to watch the campus change from when you got your bachelor's to being Dean?**

It was exciting to be in the middle of a development program. I took a lot of slides, pictures on slides, you know the old two by twos? Somewhere I had a file of the new buildings, all the new buildings, when they were digging the holes for them and things like that. Most of those slides have long since disappeared—unfortunately!

**Was the construction inconvenient?**

I don't recall. It probably was, but I don't recall. But, of course, in those days, keep in mind, we were still pretty small. In the mid-60s, the student body was just starting to come in after 63/64/65, so parking was not a big deal. That was a big thing that changed over the years - parking became a premium.

**Yeah, I am surprised by how many parking lots there are, and I'm also surprised by how much they are needed. Like every parking lot is full all day, every day.**

I guess a lot of people commute because the residences can't handle all the students.

**When you lived in residence, did you go home often?**

No, I did not. It's interesting you raised that point. I think in my first year, fall of '47, I didn't go home until Christmas time. For transportation you had to take a bus. I didn't have a car. I never had a car all through college. As a matter of fact, of 180 students in my class, you know how many cars there were and among that group?

**I can't even guess.**

Four.

**Wow!**

Now, that doesn't count the guys who were married. I'm just talking about those of us that lived in residence. Of the Class of 51 who lived in residence (there were probably around 130 or 140 living in residence), there were four cars.

**Yeah, I can see how, especially if you're taking a bus, that would be difficult. I'm blessed to have parents who will drive me places, otherwise, the bus ride from here to my house is 2 1/2 hours. Really, public transportation has got a ways to go still, that's for sure.**

Yes, I think it's probably that public transportation is not as good now as it was in my student days. There were so fewer cars and therefore the bus and train situations were even better.

**Yeah, for sure. Well, I have all my questions answered and then some, which is wonderful. I'll definitely include all of the answers to the official questions, but we also answered some stuff that can still apply, like some campus life stuff. Thank you so much.**