

Give the old college a try

VINTAGE ROCHESTER

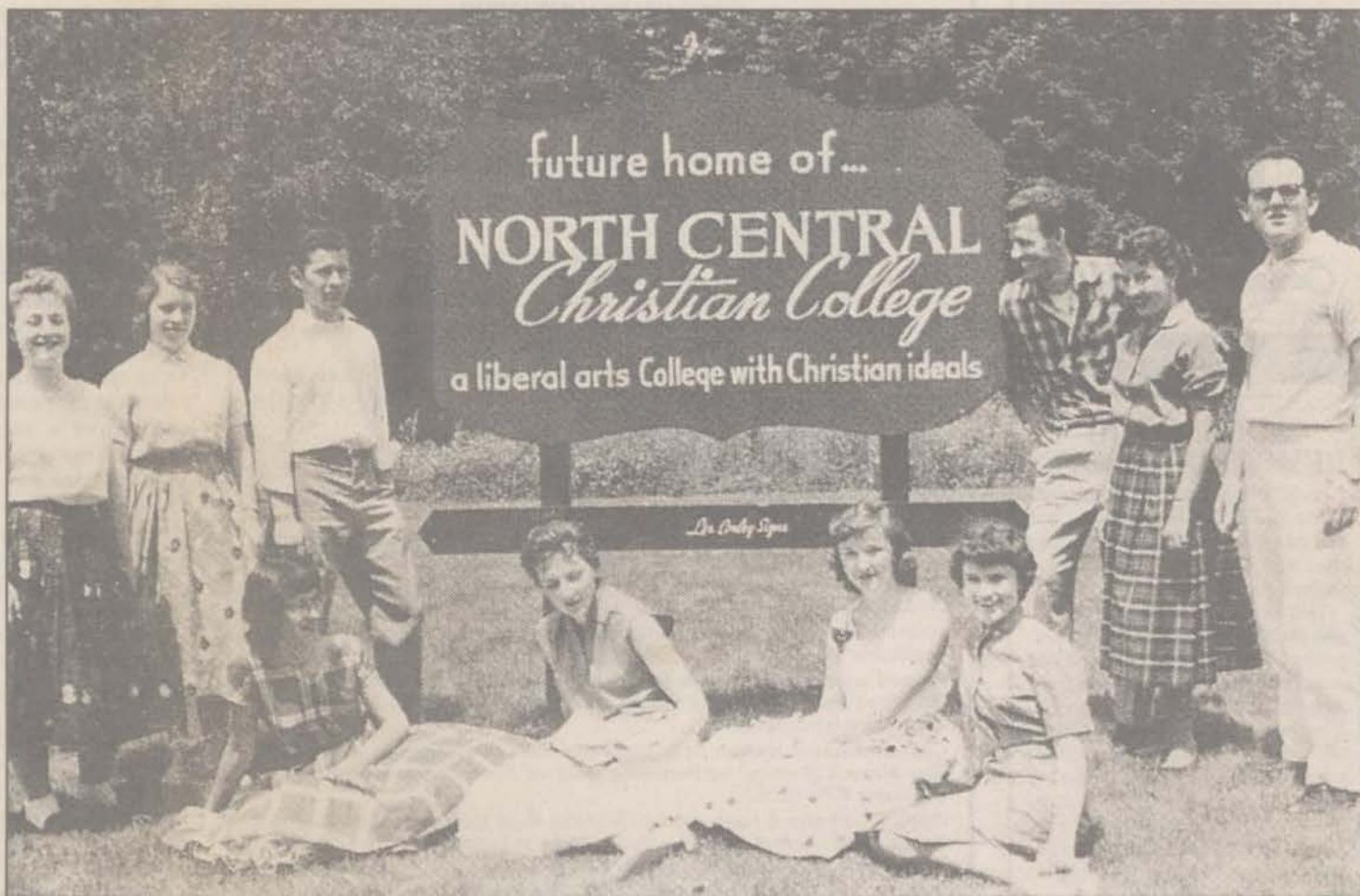


SUSAN GOWER

In 1949, Detroit-area Christian groups were exploring the idea of a Christian college. Finally, in 1954, a board was organized which included Oliver Bunting, George Ford, Harold Hawley, Wesley Hawley, Paul Lutz, Gerald Montgomery, James Thomas, G. Wheeler Utley and James Vaughn.

The board members planned to establish a junior college, with the ultimate goal of establishing a four year college. They decided to call it North Central Christian College.

By 1957 they had incorporated. Now they were looking for a president and a campus. Finally, Wheeler Utley learned of an estate near Rochester. Owned by advertising executive Lou Maxon, the estate was a lovely piece of property, with its pine trees, gentle hills and scenic lakes. The house had beautiful woodwork, a slate roof and plenty of room on the 37-acre estate. Maxon used it as a summer home and to entertain business associates. It was believed to have cost Maxon \$500,000. In 1952 it was appraised at \$250,000.



The fourth time's the charm: Rochester College is the fourth appellation applied to the institute of higher learning on Avon Road east of Livernois. Its erstwhile monikers are North Central Junior College, Michigan Christian Junior College and Michigan Christian College.

■ Why change the name to Rochester College? Reasons include the natural association with Rochester, the precedent of other Michigan colleges with religious backgrounds which are named for their cities, such as Alma, Hillsdale, and Olivet, and the desire to further cement community ties.

After months of negotiation, the board purchased the property from Maxon for \$200,000. The purchase agreement provided for a downpayment of \$50,000 with a 10-year land contract at 5 percent interest.

Rallies were held to generate student interest and financial support. Everyone from the wealthy down to neighborhood children gave money and pledges of financial assistance.

Without fanfare, Wheeler Utley

broke ground for the first new structure on the estate, a multi-purpose building, in November 1958. The former greenhouse was used for a science building. Meanwhile, Otis Gatewood became the first president of the college. Gatewood is the son of a Texas cotton farmer.

He started Abilene Christian college with \$3 in his pocket and financed his education by selling Bibles. Together with his wife, Alma, Gatewood was the

first missionary of any church to enter Germany following World War II.

When the Gatewoods arrived in Frankfort, neither spoke a word of German. They quickly learned the language, while distributing food and clothing to the destitute citizens of Frankfort and Cologne. They also established 43 churches in Germany. This energetic man would lead the new college through its early years, from 1958 to 1964.

On Sept. 28, 1959, the 54 students of the first class of North Central Christian College arrived. The rudimentary, unfinished look of the campus only led to the student dubbing themselves the "pioneers."

In May 1961, the State of Michigan recommended a name change because there were too many other institutions with the name "North Central." So on

May 27, the board changed the name of the college to Michigan Christian Junior College.

The college grew rapidly. Dorms were filled to overflowing. Twenty-four of the students who started in 1962 were from 14 countries, the largest percentage of international students in the state. Michigan Christian Junior College was awarded state accreditation. The board continued to work to pay of the mortgage. By May 1963 they succeeded. Lou Maxon, the former owner of the estate, even pledged a gift of \$8,000 to the school.

In the fall of 1964, a record 210 students enrolled for classes. That year the college purchased the Henry Gierok farm. The 54-acre farm adjoined the college campus. Together with other acquisitions, it enlarged the campus to 91 acres. The purchase price was \$54,000 cash plus a \$6,600 annual annuity payment to Mrs. Gierok. The cornfields of the Gierok farm quickly gave way to athletic fields and a tennis court. The barn is still standing and can be seen from west Avon Road.

New dorms were built. Buildings were remodeled and enlarged. The basketball team, the Warriors, chorus and drama productions became popular campus activities. Social clubs were formed. Traditions were established. On a fine spring day in 1966, President Palmer announced to the chapel audience, "It's a beautiful Day." Then he dismissed classes and everybody went to Bloomer Park.

In December 1978, the Michi-

gan State Board of Education granted Michigan Christian Junior College authorization to offer the Bachelor of Religious Education degree. The board then voted to officially drop "Junior" from the name of the college.

One of the students enrolling for fall classes in 1979 was Mary Blake. Both of her parents had attended Michigan Christian College, making her the first second-generation MCC student.

Michigan Christian College became an established part of Rochester. Popular programs such as the Michigan Christian College Child Development Center benefitted students and community.

Then, in the summer of 1997, they decided to change their name again. Why? Larry Stewart, alumni and director of public relations, explains that many people mistakenly thought the college was a seminary, or a Bible college, which is not a regular liberal arts college. Michigan Christian College has been a liberal arts college from the beginning and is regionally accredited, but after nearly two years of study, the board con-

cluded that "Our name carries a much different message than it carried in 1959."

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But if you look at an early photo, the school's mission, as displayed on the sign, is to be a liberal arts college with Christian ideals. That, Stewart promises, will never change.

Susan Gower is a member of the Rochester Historical Commission. Research information and photos courtesy of Larry Stewart, Rochester College.



Pastoral college: *Among the attractions at Rochester College are the bucolic lake behind the main buildings and the Warriors basketball team. At left, note the totem pole on the island. It is another of the college's landmarks.*