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## The Union

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# A Whole Lot of Action Goin' On

Late in the afternoon of any crisp autumn day, the carillon bells faithfully ring out from the Oklahoma Memorial Union tower.

*. . . 'Neath a western sky  
OU's chant will never die.  
Live on University.*

The bells, silent for many years, have been restored. The students, absent for so long, have returned. Like the University it serves, the Union

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By JACK COPELAND

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lives on, surviving occasional crises and somehow adjusting to the changing needs of generations of Sooners.

Through its 55-year history, the Union has seen good times and bad, and been the object of both praise and curses. In its best times, the Union has been the "hub of campus life," as

former OU Foundation and Alumni Association Director Boyd Gunning described it in a *Sooner Magazine* article during the early 1950s. More recently, the Union has struggled to preserve its place and perform its function in the University community, a victim of the southward expansion of the campus.

Today, the sure sign of renewal can be found in the grand old building's

hallways. The halls are crowded again—with students rushing to refurbished eating places or lounges, or seeking help in the many offices of OU's recently relocated Division of Student Affairs. University employees and campus visitors also are finding the way back, thanks to a four-level parking garage which has made the Union more accessible.

The people who have devoted much of their working lives to the Union believe it is "coming back," and they can cite many reasons why. Some of the most compelling arguments, however, center on history, which always seems to have been on the Union's side, and apparently still is. The challenges to its existence began practically from the moment the first brick was laid, yet the Union has managed to grow and prosper.

It was 1924 when the University — already 34 years old — embarked on a private fund-raising campaign to build a new football stadium and a student union. But this million-dollar campaign, which is remembered today as OU's first organized effort to tap private support for campus construction, perhaps can be said to have begun with a whimper.

In 1922, chemistry professor Guy Y. Williams donated two bird dogs to the University, which promptly auctioned them off for \$800 during that year's Homecoming football game between the Sooners and Missouri. The proceeds were applied to what soon became known as the Stadium-Union Fund, and subsequent gifts to the fund made it possible for the east and west bleachers of the stadium to be completed by 1928.

By 1929, the Union also was open for business, but not necessarily by unanimous consent.

The Oklahoma Memorial Union, named in honor of Sooners who died in World War I, is not owned by the University but by a non-profit, auxiliary corporation that was formed for the purpose of constructing and managing the building. With the state legislature's approval, the University leased two acres of land to the corporation, and the Oklahoma City architectural firm of Sorey and Vahlberg was selected to produce the original plans and sketches.

In order to help build the facility, OU students voted in 1928 to pay a \$2.50 student union fee every semester. Students opposed to the fee, however, proved vocal enough to attract attention from *The Daily Oklahoman*, whose coverage in turn prompted OU President William Bennett Bizzell to declare that the fee would not be collected from students who could not afford to pay it.

The Union's problems were just beginning. In its first months of operation, its concessions showed heavy losses; its manager B. S. "Cheebie" Graham, resigned to return to the flying business; students filed suit in District Court to prevent collection of the union fee; the manager of the billiards room was arrested by Norman police officers on a charge of operating pool tables without a city license; and the Cleveland County assessor announced an effort would be made to collect ad valorem taxes on the Union building.

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Eventually, the Oklahoma Supreme Court upheld the fee, but opposition to the Union continued to come from city fathers and local merchants. The *Oklahoma City Times'* Walter Harrison cynically observed that the Norman community even would have held the Union "responsible for the price of cotton, the limited proration in the Oklahoma City oil field and the price of bread."

The unhappy neighbors soon were forced to resign themselves to the Union's existence, but not before causing the state senate to investigate charges of gambling in the pool room and claims of unfair competition. The investigating legislative committee found no irregularities and declared the Union was "serving a most useful purpose and has an-

swered a great need for the school, not only in furnishing a general center of supplies for the student body, but also in serving as a general melting pot for the fraternity and non-fraternity groups, thus serving to promote a more democratic atmosphere."

Those were probably the toughest days for the Union, although controversies would continue to plague every manager who would serve the Union thereafter. Graham's replacement, Frank Cleckler, endured not only the legislative investigation but also saw the Union go into technical default on a bond payment before working out an acceptable payment schedule with bondholders.

After its rocky start, however, the Union assumed the role its planners had hoped for—as a "meeting ground" for students where "blackboards and books could be forgotten," as well as a popular gathering place for returning alumni.

The early Union lacked the 99-foot-tall clock tower, which would be added by the Works Project Administration in 1936. But the original three-story structure featured "only the finest light fixtures, wood trimmings and decorations," declared a January 1929 article in *Sooner Magazine*.

The building's ground floor contained the book exchange, the infamous billiards room, a bowling alley and the cafeteria. Offices of the Alumni Association and the Union management were located on the first floor, along with various student lounges and a game room. In the south end of the second floor were offices for student government and meeting rooms, while the north end of the second and third floors contained the ballroom, featuring high windows and 12 chandeliers valued at \$30,000.

By 1936, there were as many as 6,000 persons visiting the building daily, according to one count.

Students increasingly made the Union the center of activities on campus, and as the University's enrollment continued to grow prior to World War II, the need to organize these activities became more pressing.

As the war's end approached, the Union hired its first full-time director

of activities, Norman native Mary Lou Stubbeman. As a student, Stubbeman had been an active participant in Union programming and was president of the Union Activities Committee during her senior year. She was a natural choice for the job when Union manager Ted Beard created the position in 1945.

"At the commencement I sat next to Ted Beard, and after I gave the graduation address, he told me to come see him," she recalls now. "He offered me the director's job and said it would be a new, full-time position." For years after, she would remember that commencement as "about the biggest single day of my life."

Stubbeman served the Union for nine years before moving to Honolulu, where she became an activities director at the University of Hawaii and later married Gilbert L. Livingston. During her tenure at OU, such traditional events as Sooner Scandals and University Sing blossomed under the watchful eye of "Stubby," as she had been called by her college classmates.

"As director of Union Activities, I saw myself as a social engineer," Livingston says. "We designed a pro-

gram to meet the students' recreational, social and intellectual needs not being met by other groups on campus. I tried to maintain a balance between planning and participation, and also to provide an opportunity for students to learn leadership, group planning, efficiency and the sharing of responsibilities as committee members."

Activities were scheduled year-round by the Union Activities office, from fall registration through the summer months. One of the more popular events of the postwar days was the "College of Unionology," which introduced new and returning students to the Union itself. "It was a huge, crowded bash!" Livingston remembers. "Everything was open and there was an activity in every room."

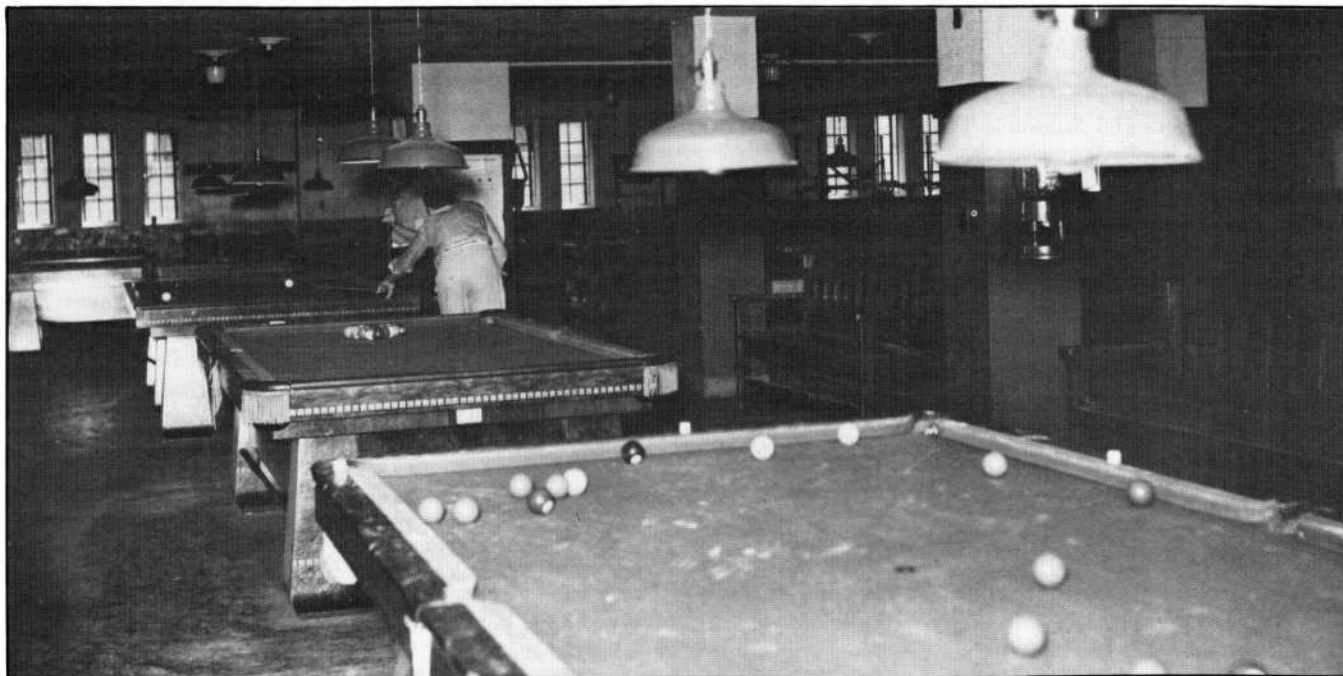
During the days following the OU-Texas football game, students celebrated Frontier Week on campus, decorating the Union and other campus buildings. "They used bales of hay, wagons, tepees — one year, the students built an outhouse," she recalls. "It was stolen — well, actually the administration had it removed because it was too obscene for the campus. Naturally, the students had

fun reporting the theft to the police — their description over the phone had me in stitches."

The office of the Union Activities Board, popularly called the UAB, became a clearinghouse for entertainment on campus during those days. Besides planning the Variety Show for Homecoming, the University Sing and Sooner Scandals, Livingston helped students plan dances, ski trips, concerts by such big-name bandleaders as Tex Benecke and even square dancing lessons with "400 students learning to 'do si do.'"

A couple of Union-sponsored activities ran into trouble — very much in keeping with the building's tradition. A Thanksgiving-time "turkey toss" was halted when the idea of throwing a live turkey from the Union tower to a crowd of students gathered below prompted considerable protest. Likewise, a pipe-smoking contest in which OU President George Lynn Cross himself participated drew fire from the Anti-Cigarette League.

Other activities were born according to the times. The influx of servicemen into the University following World War II gave OU its ini-



*A legislative investigation of the Union's unfair business practices centered on the infamous pool room pictured above. Highlight of the testimony came from a student witness who had overheard another say, "I'll bet you a dime I'll put the nine ball in the side pocket." After a long and colorful history, the pool room closed when the law school moved south.*



*The partially completed Oklahoma Memorial Union was opened in 1929 without the famed clock tower pictured above. A WPA project in 1935 added the landmark to the building, and its carillon bells came as a private gift in 1955.*

tial taste of the baby boom, giving rise to a "Diaper Derby and Baby Contest." As the number of postwar babies on campus decreased, the event died.

By the time Livingston left for Hawaii, the Union truly had become the hub of campus life. But after only 20 years, the facilities were inadequate, prompting the construction of the north and south wings of the building. The new additions were completed in 1951 at a cost of \$2,300,000.

Manager Ted Beard did not live to see the completion of the expansion project. He died on April 15, 1950, following a heart attack. His contributions were recognized when the Union's main lounge became the Ted Beard Lounge in his memory.

Beard, too, had endured his share of challenges during his tenure, including an attempt by Gov. Leon C. "Red" Phillips in 1940 to have him fired. Phillips actually made the conflict with his fellow OU alumnus a campaign issue, pledging that his

first official act if elected governor would be to remove the Union manager, who also served as secretary of the OU Alumni Association.

Phillips complained that Beard was living in the Union's apartments in "regal splendor" — a charge Boyd Gunning claimed was untrue in his 1950s *Sooner Magazine* article about the Union. "Although Beard worked a good portion of the day, and often night, in the Union, he never actually made his home for a single day in the building," Gunning wrote. "Since the facts were all on Beard's side of this controversy, he weathered the criticism and continued to spend his days and nights working for the Union he served so admirably."

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Beard's financial assistant, Hillyer Freeland, began what would be a 29-year term as Union manager. His assistant was Jack Guthrie, who had joined the staff in January 1950.

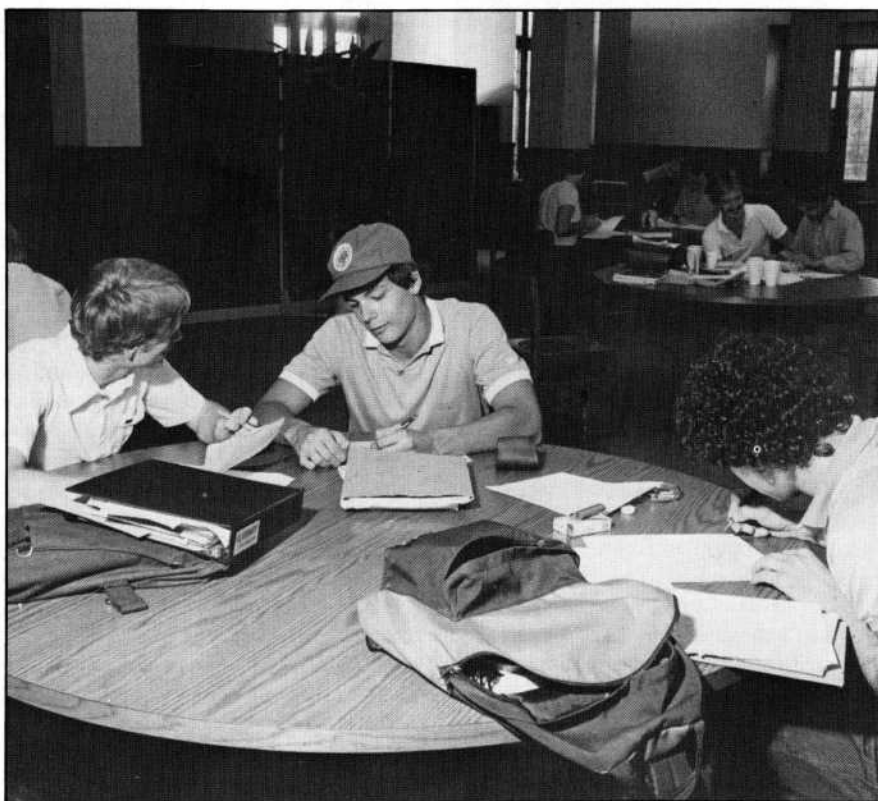
Guthrie became director of the Union in 1979 after Freeland's retirement. During his 33-year-association with the building, he has seen the staff grow from 35 to 140 employees and the annual budget from \$700,000 to \$2.4 million. Today the Union is 175,000 square feet, two and a half times its original size.

Although the Union was experiencing a time of prosperity when Guthrie came on board, he soon would share in the decline of the facility's fortunes. In the late 1950s, a campus bursting at the seams in its location north of Lindsey Street began to grow to the south, taking a good portion of the Union clientele along with it.

"From the late 1950s to the late 1960s, we saw the construction of the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education, dormitories and several



*The new Sooner Center, which provides student information and referral services, is one of a number of support agencies now doing business in the Union.*



*The Ted Beard Lounge, newly converted into a study lounge with individual carrels, tables and comfortable chairs, is usually full of students looking for a quiet place to hit the books or even to grab a quick nap between classes.*

Greek housing facilities," says Guthrie. "The campus became elongated, and this building trend left the Union on the very northern edge of the campus. It made access to the building less convenient. During this time, Union growth reached a plateau," he says.

As the Union became more isolated from much of the student population on campus, programs such as Union Activities suffered severely. By the mid-1960s, the Union still was home for the Sooner Scandals, University Sing and other larger activities, but participation in lesser programs in the building declined.

In the late 1960s, the retirement of OU President George Lynn Cross prompted the administrative reorganization on campus that resulted in, among other things, the creation of an office responsible for the "University Community." About the same time, OU students approved a new constitution that called for the formation of a new student government — the University of Oklahoma Student Association.

"Under the new student constitution, part of the student activity fee went to student government, and UOSA wanted to take charge of student activities," remembers Anona Adair, a 1961 graduate who returned to the University in 1966 as a counselor and who today serves as vice president in charge of OU's Division of Student Affairs.

"The Union Activities program was weakened by this time, and most students were involved in activities sponsored through the dean of students' office," she says. "Union Activities had to be self-supporting, but it was operating at a deficit. After considerable student discussion, it was decided that Union Activities would move into University Community."

Adair, who was serving as assistant dean of women by then, was named director of student activities, and Union Activities was combined into what is known today as the Campus Activities Council.

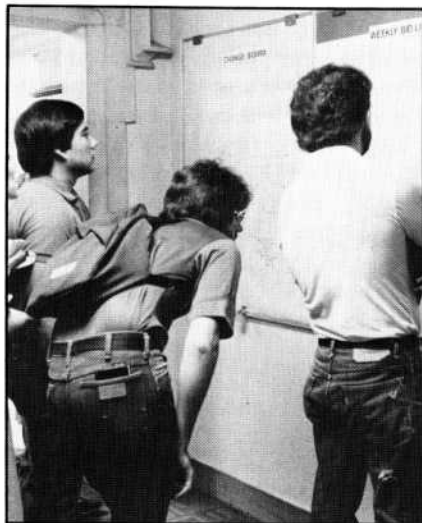
"The University Community offices — including the Interfraternity Council, Panhellenic, housing and student government — moved to



*Union director Jack Guthrie, right, and food director Charles Swaim confer with banquet chef George Thompson.*



*In repairing the carillon bells, the Union's Jerry Tarver substituted ingenuity for unavailable replacement parts.*



*Hopeful graduates check job interview sheets in the OU placement office.*



*It should come as no surprise to OU parents that the automatic bank tellers in the Union lobby are the two most heavily used bank machines in the state.*

Walker Tower," Adair says. "Fewer and fewer student groups were in the Union."

With the completion of the new Law Center on south campus, even the law students from nearby Monnet Hall abandoned their favorite haunt, the Union billiards room, forcing that venerable institution to close its doors.

The building appeared to lose its soul. It no longer could claim convincingly the title of "student union." The Union was no longer the center of campus life. But a few people on campus, including a number of students, were concerned about the building's decline, and in the late 1970s they decided to do something about it.

The battle to save the Union was joined once again, in a spirit reminiscent of the past.

A task force consisting of students, faculty, and representatives of Student Affairs and the Union staff set out to identify the facility's problems and offer solutions. "Some of their recommendations were implemented right away," says Adair, "And some we're still working on."

Among other things, the task force recommended greater involvement in Union decision making by "users," the establishment of a Union Programming Board, a study of the feasibility of building a parking garage, and the relocation of student offices in the Union.

The Union has adopted many of the panel's recommendations and has tried a few remedies of its own, says Guthrie. It also is benefiting from another factor — an increase in the number of commuter students attending the University — and stands to profit from construction of the Energy Center and School of Music Building on the campus' north end.

A 177-car parking garage — the result of another fund-raising drive — was dedicated in 1982, making the Union more accessible to off-campus visitors and on-campus users.

"Another contributing factor," says Guthrie, "is the number of relatively new services that we're offering in the Union. The recently remodeled stu-

dent study lounge is a big change. The automatic banking tellers are a tremendously used service; they are the two most heavily used bank machines in the state. The Goodie Shop, the Copy Shop, the Typing Service, the Hairstylist, Crossroads Restaurant, all are geared to students' needs and are popular."

The computerized Union Box Office was opened this fall to handle ticket sales for entertainment events at Lloyd Noble Center and the Rupel

Jones Theater on campus and the Myriad, Fairgrounds Arena and Civic Center Music Hall in Oklahoma City.

In addition, a Union Programming Board was established as part of the Campus Activities Council at the task force's suggestion, and is sponsoring activities in the building in cooperation with the Union's management — shades of the old UAB.

More changes are coming, Guthrie adds. "We've done considerable remodeling and refurbishing, but more

is needed. It's an ongoing job to maintain the building. The Will Rogers Cafeteria and Cafe Nationale (formerly the Terrace Room) have not been changed for 10 years or more, and they're beginning to show wear. Some of the original meeting rooms need improvement, as do the dining rooms. We'll do these jobs as the funds become available.

"As usage of the building increases, these maintenance requirements also increase," he said.

But the increased usage of the building is a rewarding sign of progress for Guthrie, as it is for Adair, whose commitment to the building is equally strong.


"This is the University of Oklahoma's Union, and I think that while it may not include some of the facilities that other college unions offer, it is important that students use it and feel it is theirs," she says.

As commuter students made the Union their "living room at the University," Student Affairs responded by providing space for the Commuter Center president's office in the Union. "As that blossomed, it became necessary to move other offices into the Union," says Adair, who now has her own office and those of Student Development and Career Planning and Placement in the Union.

The new Union tenants include the offices for the Graduate Student Association, the Interfraternity and Panhellenic councils, and the Campus Activities Council. Academic support services, the tutoring service and the test file center, also have been relocated, and a new Sooner Center for information and referral services was opened this fall.

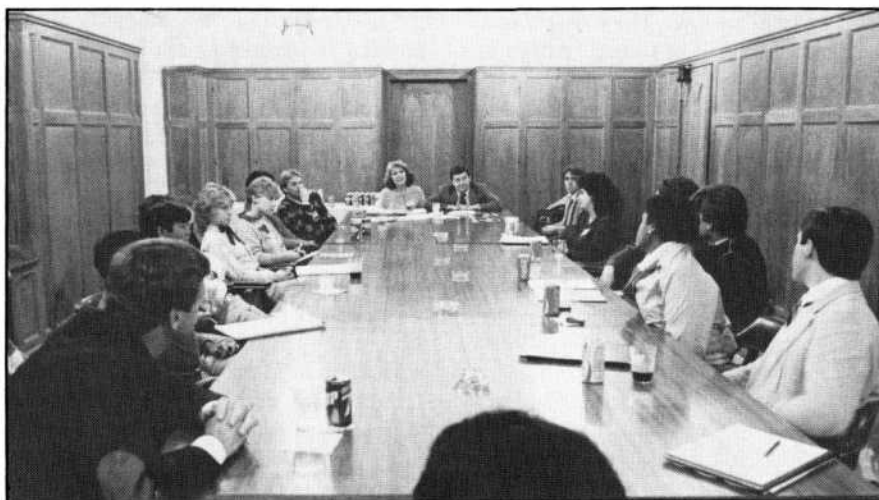
"I think we're getting really close to making the Union what it was once before," Adair says.

Such optimism hasn't rung through the building's arched doorways for some time now, but it's a pleasant sound. Only time will tell whether the Union truly will prosper as in the past, but a look at the building's history offers nothing but encouragement.

For more than half a century, the Oklahoma Memorial Union has made the best of its good times and survived the bad. It lives on. 



*Student Affairs officials Chris Purcell, left, Dave Schrage and Anona Adair, both at right, meet regularly in the Union with officers of the OU Student Association, Congress Chair Beth Garrett and OUSA President Mark Driscoll.*



*Union meeting rooms are in constant use today as in the past. Here a committee of students confers with Vice President Anona Adair and Provost J. R. Morris.*