

OU Landscape Changes As Wilson and Niemann Pass into Sooner History

Norman residents — especially those in close proximity to the University of Oklahoma — know that campus buildings sometime seem to vanish overnight. Such a disappearing act again occurred last summer with the demise of the remaining units of Niemann apartments and Lincoln and Cleveland houses in Woodrow Wilson Center. The passing of these OU landmarks deserves a postscript.

In 1943, with the student population increasing and wartime training programs tying up the already meager supply of University housing, OU President Joseph A. Brandt arranged with the National Housing Authority to construct a facility for the Army and Navy trainees. Brandt let the contract for Wilson Center, seven multi-unit, two-story, clay tile block dormitories and an administration building with total accommodations for 900, freeing campus housing previously leased to the military for civilian student occupancy.

When the war ended in 1945, OU President George L. Cross faced similar circumstances as increasing enrollments of veterans taxed limited housing. With Hester-Robertson, Jefferson House and Wilson Center supplementing fraternity, sorority and off-campus housing, the University could accommodate 5,000, but enrollment was expected to double or possibly triple, and soon. A \$275,000 bond issue was approved, and 96 apartments in four two-story buildings rose on the Hal Niemann field, named for an OU student athlete killed in a 1936 polo match.

For 40 years, Wilson and Niemann were home to thousands of OU students, even as the University was adding other housing facilities. Cate, Cross, Parkview and Jones appeared during the 1950s. Adams, Kraettli, Walker, Couch, Yorkshire and Wilkinson were built in the 1960s and 1970s.

When the '80s rolled around, the years and the masses of students had taken their toll, and the old buildings were in dire need of repair. The buildings composing Wilson and Niemann needed new roofs; neither center was

air conditioned. Wilson Center, which boasted only one shower room for each floor, required masonry repair and replacement of rotten windows. Numerous fire hazards plagued both locations. A wooden structure, Neimann still operated open space heaters and had been invaded by termites.

Don Nist, OU civil engineer and demolition project coordinator, explains that bringing the buildings up to standard was not considered a cost-effective proposition.

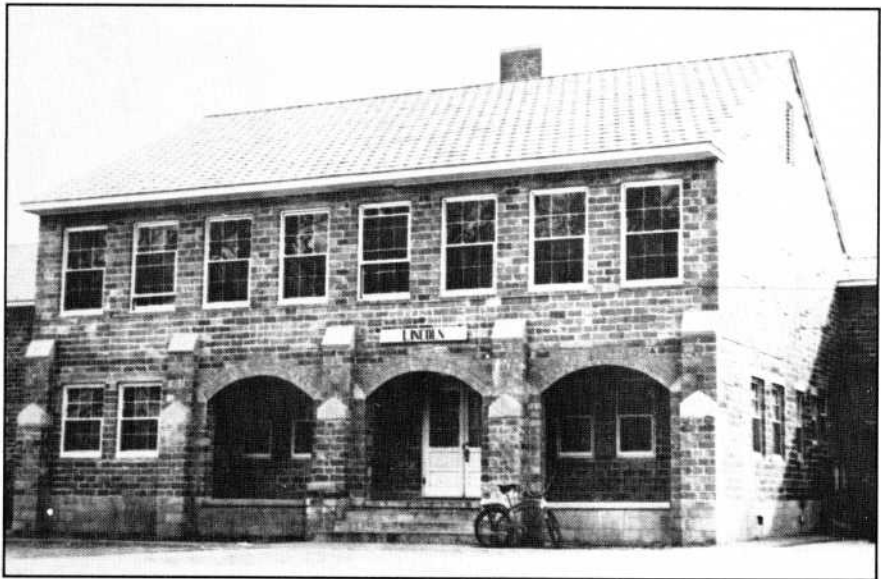
"It was a decision of economics. The cost for Niemann alone would have been between \$255,000 and \$963,000," Nist says of refurbishing plans ranging from minimum to first class. Total cost of the demolition of

demolished in 1979 to make room for Huston Huffman Physical Fitness Center, and two of the four units of Niemann were taken down in 1985.

"We really wanted better buildings to put students in. We were ashamed of these buildings," Nist admits. "They had become unfit for student habitation."

Another contributing factor was current population and housing availability, Schrage says, noting that the housing crunch of late is not what it once was.

"As of this date, our apartment occupancy rate stands at 94 percent, and residence hall is at 90 percent," says Schrage. Even with the current upward enrollment trends, he notes,



A relatively new Lincoln House is shown post-World War II before an exterior finish of a rosy hue forever after tagged Wilson Center "The Pink Palaces."

both centers was about \$70,000.

Dave Schrage, assistant vice president for student affairs and director of housing, confirms that the cost factor figured prominently into the decision to level the old dorms.

"We had maintained them to provide a low-cost housing alternative over the years," Schrage says, adding that the cost of refurbishing would have taken the old dorms out of the low-cost category.

The old Wilson Center administration building remains for the time being and is utilized for Central Mail Services, storage and other offices. The first five units of Wilson Center were

"with privately owned apartments continuing to break ground around Norman, we don't expect a housing shortage to cause a problem."

Additionally, 100 rooms for student housing became available recently when the Federal Aviation Administration vacated a section of Cross Center. For the future, Nist says the land formerly occupied by Wilson and Niemann will remain a "green belt."

On a growing campus where green is becoming a scarce commodity continuously endangered by brick and mortar, perhaps that honor will suffice as a memorial to the buildings steeped in Sooner history. — MF