

Courtesy: Boyce Timmons



**Times were tough,
and yet they were
some of the best
years of their lives.**

Even before it was completed in 1925, Oklahoma Memorial Stadium had become a symbol, built as a monument to the young soldiers of World War I. Later, the playing field was dedicated to the spirit and legacy of Bennie Owen, the gritty, one-armed coach who led OU's football team through 22 glorious seasons.

In subsequent years, the stadium became synonymous with conference and national championships and Heisman trophy winners. Today it stands as the imposing landmark by which newcomers orient themselves to an unfamiliar campus.

LIFE IN THE STADIUM PENTHOUSE

by Lisa C. Smith

As famous as this football shrine is, however, few recall the time when Oklahoma Memorial Stadium also served as a men's dormitory during the waning years of the Great Depression. From 1937 to 1942, the stadium was home away from home for young men struggling to find resources to attend the state's leading university. For some 300 students—many straight off the family farm—the stadium provided an affordable, although peculiar, place to live during what they describe as the toughest and best years of their lives.

With the help of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the University's support and the mentoring of a young law student named Boyce Timmons, five years of co-op residents completed their college degrees. Many from this group of economically disadvantaged men who labored for their university education have risen through the ranks to the top of their professions, in areas such as aeronautics, academics, finance, medicine, military service and the petroleum industry.

In May 1994, the former residents of the stadium co-op returned to the Norman campus to reminisce about the days at the "penthouse" and thank Timmons and his wife, Alice, for their help more than 50 years ago.

Construction of the stadium, west of Jenkins between Brooks and Lindsey, began in 1922. The west wing was occupied in 1925, the east in 1928, later joined on the north to form a horseshoe. OU President Stratton Brooks envisioned the complex as a place for young men to hone their citizenship skills before embarking upon a career in the adult world, where each would develop "ideals of courage, endurance, the necessity of preparation, fair play, clean living and clean sport, ideals that mean much to American life . . ."

A new president, William Bennett Bizzell, came to OU with a philosophy of broadening educational opportunities that would extend to the common man, promising limitless educational opportunities to the state's residents.

As the Roaring '20s became the Depressing '30s, the University's ambitious plans gave way to practical concerns. The University would indeed provide what newspaper editorials called "a cheap education," which some critics believed would "flood the college to overflowing," as reported in *The Oklahoma Daily*.

For a few hundred men, that cheap education would be made possible in part by the stadium co-op. There at the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, they would develop the traits Brooks had described, while securing the education to compete for urban jobs far from their rural hometowns so hard hit by the drought in the Dust Bowl.

As part of the New Deal, the first

federal grant program for student employment came to the University of Oklahoma in 1937 in the form of the National Youth Administration, directed by Timmons. Students participating in the NYA program earned 25 cents per hour or \$9.80 per month.

Timmons helped students find jobs, but they also needed inexpensive room and board. A group of students, including Timmons and Glen Milam, hatched the stadium co-op idea, based on a program at an Alabama university. After pitching their plan to University officials, they received an emergency legislative appropriation for

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renovating several rooms on the stadium's second floor for sleeping and studying. The University paid the utility bills, a fraternity donated a stove, and President Bizzell supplied the refrigerator.

"At first everyone thought it was a wild idea," Timmons remembers. "People didn't think we could pull it off. But the University really supported the program. This was the first time OU had supported so many people so they could get an education."

The only on-campus co-op, the stadium penthouse was one of six co-ops that cropped up in Norman during the Depression, providing an alternative to a fraternity or boarding house. The traditional living arrangements were often twice as expensive as the co-op,

with few students able to pay the full costs of room, board and tuition.

"Without the co-op, it would have been impossible for young people to go to college," says co-op alumnus Murry Joe Flippo.

Not only did the facility provide the bare necessities of board and bunk, it also gave small-town students emotional support and a belief in their ability to succeed.

"Young people didn't believe they could go to college," says Flippo. "They didn't have the courage to try. Most kids had to hitchhike from where they lived just to get to the University. People getting out of high school couldn't visualize that going to college could be done."

Many farmers and their families found it nearly impossible to survive. By the mid '30s, approximately 150,000 Oklahomans were out of work and 700,000 were on relief. With more to lose by staying at home than by attempting college, a few adventurous young men packed their bags and hitchhiked to town. There they could find a smattering of part-time jobs that almost would cover the costs of their education. In order to save money, many mailed canvas sacks of laundry home for 25 cents; their mothers would wash the clothes and send them back. Other ingenious co-op students would leave school for the weekends or go without eating in order to sell their weekend meals to other hungry students who could pay \$1 per meal.

For those young men who braved the unknown, Timmons served as a much-needed father figure. Combining emotional support with upper-classman knowledge, Timmons helped the young men learn to make their way in the big city of Norman.

"He had a tact, a kindliness, an attitude and an ability to guide us as we matured," Odell Waldby remembers.

Paul Cummings agrees. "Boyce had an immense interest in other people and their needs, and he tried to help. He did things for people, but he never talked about them. He never tried to make himself important. Sometimes you didn't even know he was working on something until you saw the end result. And sometimes you wouldn't know until 50 years later when you'd hear somebody talk about some of the



The co-op dorm "mess hall" could feed 90, including the 60 residents and other boarders. The students' sponsor, mentor and father figure, Boyce Timmons, is shown at left enjoying the most economical meal on campus.

wonderful things he had done."

Without Timmons, many students would not have been able to graduate as quickly as they did if at all, Waldby says.

"Most of us were from small towns, and we were hard up for money to go to college. Because of programs like the NYA and the co-op, we could carry a full load and graduate in four years. In most other cases where students were working and self-supporting, they would graduate in six years instead of four," he adds.

While the co-op was run by students, Timmons could be counted on to find the extra job to keep a student in school, launder 60 identical bedspreads in his wife's new washing machine, provide dinner or offer a place to stay for a while. He also was able to administer his own brand of justice, which was needed only once.

That occasion resulted from a distressed co-op cook's report that mice were pilfering the food. Late one evening, the residents had tiptoed out of the room, climbed into the attic and dropped through the ceiling of the kitchen, to devour the contraband of

the night: ice cream and strawberries. Of course they nearly choked when Timmons strolled in.

Caught in the act, they casually invited Timmons to share the spoils liberated from the kitchen. After telling a few jokes and sampling the goodies, he left without a word.

"I'll never forget the way he handled it," recalls Waldby. "When the light came on at two in the morning, he was in the kitchen, waiting. He really never said a word. But we never did it again."

Timmons remembers the incident fondly and downplays any discipline problems. "They all had the same desire to get an education, which made it pretty easy to keep order. They all had motivation and determination, and they wanted their education badly enough to live in the stadium to get it."

Besides learning about justice, students learned endurance, according to Flippo, who remembers the living conditions as "pretty rough."

Each semester 60 men were assigned to double-decker beds placed barracks-style against the walls. In early fall and late spring, the two

small push-out windows did not generate enough ventilation to offset the warmth of all those bodies.

"Lord, it was just about enough to bake you," winces Charles McKinney, who adds that many students preferred sleeping in the bleachers or on the cool grass of Owen Field to remaining in the hot dorm rooms.

While the co-op rooms were spartan and devoid of creature comforts, many of the young men were accustomed to difficult living conditions. "We didn't think about it being tough," shrugs Emil Stratton. "We just accepted it and made the best of it."

Likewise, some could not afford textbooks, so they shared a coveted book through a complicated but firm schedule that allowed each fellow a few hours of reading between jobs and classes before passing it on to the next student.

The difficulties notwithstanding, the men who attended college during the Great Depression felt fortunate, according to Flippo.

"Most of us were poor, and we felt lucky to be there. And, we were there with a purpose. Many people there had to sacrifice something for an education so they could make it possible to send some of their younger brothers and sisters or to secure a position for themselves so they could take care of older people or family members who were ill."

Despite daily competition for shaving room, shower time, phone calls and room to dress in front of their lockers, the men have fond memories of living in the co-op.

"This was probably one of the most enjoyable periods of my life," Flippo says. "We were all able to live together and have so much fun we almost hated to leave when it was over."

Fun ranged from the shenanigans associated with daily dorm life to the homespun attempts at college night life at the Oklahoma Memorial Union ballroom or Rickner's Student Shop on campus corner.

"We had good, old-fashioned fun on a daily basis," Flippo remembers. "We never did it in the nature of belittling or hurting anyone. People simply took it good humoredly. They had as much fun out of it even if they might have been the victim of the joke."

Indeed, no one was safe. Everyone

was a victim eventually. The antics might have taken the form of a traditional short-sheeting, a bed filled with powdered cocoa, hidden alarm clocks, bowling ball-filled suitcases. McClure Concessions was a favorite target as was the Coke machine, which could be relied upon to provide a constant parade of pop bottles after being flooded with salt water.

When the penthouse residents took a break from practical jokes, they attended to familiarizing themselves with the finer things in life, namely dancing.

"Most of us came from small towns where dancing was evil," says McKinney. "So very few of us knew how to dance. We would play records in the dorm and practice dancing."

Dance practice often was assisted by one Jean Wilson, a 5' 10", 260-pound second-team All-State center from Broken Arrow, who, despite his bulk, was reputed to be lighter on his feet than many of the women on campus.

After practicing in their stadium home, the men would walk to a formal dance at the union, where bands would play, "In the Mood," "One O' Clock Jump" or "Why Do I Love You?" Those who could not afford to take a date to the dance could stand in the stag line, where good dancers could cut in. During the week, "The Ramblers" often held gut-bucket sessions at Rickner's, where students could sip a soda or practice the jitterbug.

Recreational sports were available at any time. Residents of the co-op had immediate access to tennis courts, handball, a football field and an intramural sports program. And, when those failed to amuse, there were other favorite activities such as fraternity baiting.

The classic exploit remains the legendary snowball massacre secretly prompted by the co-op members but fought by Alpha Tau Omega and Beta Theta Pi. One Saturday morning after a perfect snowfall, a co-op resident called the ATO house, posing as the Beta president. "If you guys don't have a large yellow streak down your back, you will be in our front yard in 30 minutes for a snowball fight," he said, issuing the challenge. Then he called the Betas and insulted them as well. Both fraternities rose to the



Courtesy: Boyce Timmons

Each stadium dorm resident was assigned a single locker to hold his clothes and other necessities—a couple of pairs of pants, a few shirts, a pair of shoes.



Courtesy: Boyce Timmons

Co-op boarders file into the mess hall. Some residents occasionally stretched their budgets by going without eating or leaving for the weekend in order to sell their meals to other students who could afford the \$1 tab.

occasion, pummeling each other with a vengeance that the stadium members remember with a grin nearly 60 years later.

World War II mobilization diminished the need for men's co-op space. By 1942, enrollment had dropped significantly. Later during the war, for the first and only time in University history, women would outnumber men three to one. The time had come to close the penthouse.

Looking back, the co-op seems to have served both the lofty ambitions




Gill Jain

Paul Cummings, Midwest City, retired president of Globe Life Insurance Company, reminisces with fellow co-op alumni about the time when he lived with Boyce and Alice Timmons while attending the University.

of Stratton Brooks and the progressive hopes of William Bennett Bizzell, while managing to help 300 young men from farms and small towns struggling to get an education during the Great Depression.

The only regret among the former co-op residents seems to be waiting 57 years to reminisce about those days and thank mentor Timmons.

"We have thought of each other through the years, and we have lost addresses," relates Flippo. "However, it has been as easy to assemble this reunion as it would have been if we had done this 10 years after we left school.

"Everybody says we waited too long. It probably would be proper to say, 'would/should have done it sooner—and more often.'" 



Gill Jain

The co-op dorm reunion inspired an article in The Norman Transcript, being reviewed here by Norman attorney Frank Pickel, left, honoree Boyce Timmons, center, and Lawson Thomas, Midwest City, right, an artist who is retired after 30 years in the Air Force. Thomas taught art at Oklahoma City Community College and has shown his work worldwide.



Gill Jain

Proving that truth is stranger than fiction are the love stories of three World War II Army nurses who married the OU co-op dorm alumni they first met while all were serving in the South Pacific. Gladys Lepley met Tulsa CPA Jim, left, and Christine Taylor met Glen, center, in the Philippine capital of Manila. Glen, who dined at the co-op mess hall but did not live in the dorm, had a long career as controller and administrative manager with Amoco Canada; he and Christine divide their time between Tulsa and Idaho, where they remodel and sell condominiums. Bette Bowie, of Federal Way, Washington, met pilot Tom, right, when he made a forced landing in Burma. Ironically the first to reach his plane was fellow co-op dorm resident Charles Frasier. Colonel Bowie retired from the Air Force to work as a mechanical engineer with an architectural firm.