



Robert Taylor

Oklahoma Memorial Union administrator Clarke Stroud stands at the east entrance framed by the decorative details in cast stone that have been duplicated throughout the renovated building to lend continuity. Often questioned about the shield above the door, Stroud confesses that WPA stone masons charged with the Union's original construction apparently had carte blanche in adding decorative elements. The chicken and moon on the shield have no more meaning than one craftsman's idea of what seemed appropriate at the time.

New Life for a Grand Old Girl

BY ROBERT FERRIER

FOLLOWING AN \$11.5 MILLION, 34-MONTH "SURGERY," THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA CAMPUS BEATS STRONG AGAIN.

After too long an absence, students flock into the renovated Oklahoma Memorial Union, enjoying facilities such as the Beard Lounge, Meacham Auditorium, Ballroom, Food Court, meeting rooms and 24-hour computer center.

"OU President David Boren told me our mission was to put the word 'student' back into the student union," says Clarke Stroud, administrator of OMU since 1997. "Our challenge was to return the Union to the center of campus life, including all members of the OU family. Over its 70-year history, the Union gradually lost some of its appeal. Student space gave way to administrative space. The facility's infrastructure deteriorated. We began work in October 1995, and students tell us the result was worth the wait. Last spring we averaged 8,000 visits per day, perhaps more than any other Norman building."

The Phase I renovation, including all four floors of the main facility, was completed in March 1998. Phase II, the Anderson Room, added 4,000 square feet adjacent to the Will Rogers Room in the fall of 1998.

"Named after Linda and Kent Anderson, of Houston, who made a generous contribution to the University, the room will have data connections in 36 booths along three walls,"

Stroud says. "Visitors will notice the high cathedral ceiling and oak trim. Furnished with mission-style tables and chairs, the room adds 250 multi-purpose seats. Students can eat there, but the rest of the time they will use the space for meetings, study and laptop computer work. They can connect into the University's backbone computer, which will give them access to the Internet, e-mail and class assignments, for example."

Refurbishing the Will Rogers Room, once the Union's cafeteria and now part of the Food Court, will be completed by January, except for some tile work. Scheduled for completion next summer are murals by Louise Jones, instructor in the OU School of Art, depicting chronological development of student life from the late 1800s forward.

Also by next summer, the first-floor Crossroads area will add a 24-hour restaurant, complete with satellite television, and a stage for "open mike" performances. The Crossroads already

houses an electronic game room, billiards and a branch of the OU Credit Union. In the arcade hallway near the entrance to Crossroads is a U. S. Post Office. Just down the hall, a satellite studio of WIRE, the new OU student-run radio station, will be located inside the Union's west entrance.

The second floor is home to the Stuart Landing, named for donors Dee Dee and Jon Stuart, of Tulsa. The south

**A complete
make-over is
bringing the
students back to
the venerable
Oklahoma
Memorial Union.**



David Stapleton, of OU's Architectural and Engineering Services, consults a check-list of finish-out details for the multi-purpose, 4,000-square-foot Anderson Room. Clustered beneath the high, oak-trimmed cathedral ceiling are 36 booths with data and electrical connections for laptop computers.

wall displays two bronze plaques cast in 1928 for the Union's opening. One lists the Union's first board of governors. The other honors OU students who lost their lives in World War I. The entire building memorializes war dead.

Centered in the Stuart Landing floor is a six-foot bronze seal of the University, a creation of renowned Santa Fe and OU artist-in-residence Paul Moore, who also is working on two additional bronze pieces for the landing. One, a nearly life-size depiction of "the sower" from the seal, bearing the face of OU's first president, David Ross Boyd, will be placed in the west window. The other, a "bas relief" on the north wall, will represent men and women who contributed to the armed forces throughout the years.

Two second-floor rooms honor John Houchin and his late wife, Louise, for their gifts and service to the University. John Houchin, of Bartlesville, served as an OU Regent from 1963-70. The John Houchin Room was once the office of Ted Beard, the first Union director.

Justice Alma Wilson's portrait hangs in a second floor room named for her. The first female Chief Justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, Wilson is a long-time supporter of the Union, having sat on the governing Board of Trustees for the facility when it was a private corporation. The room contains a 27-foot conference table and leather chairs and a

plaque listing Justice Wilson's accomplishments.

In September 1997, the class of 1956 created a generous endowment to light the Union Clock Tower. "Now everyone on campus sees the tower at night," Stroud says. "We are grateful to the class for their contribution."

Phase III construction of the \$5.25 million Conoco Student Leadership Wing will house the OU Student Association and other major student orga-

"We've fabricated column bases into light fixtures, which appear as wall sconces throughout the building to achieve a common theme."

nizations. Scheduled for opening in spring of 2000, the facility will include a 15,000-square-foot outdoor plaza where students can eat and socialize. As a prelude to the leadership wing, President Boren brought together eight student groups in a pilot project designed to build relationships across campus. These groups share office and work space in the easily accessible Student Activity Center on the second floor, north of Meacham Auditorium.

Most of the functions previously located in this area—then known as the Sooner Center, with its student organization mail boxes, Student Development Staff, Test Files and the Campus Activities Council—have moved to the Center for Student Life on the third floor at the building's south end. The vice president for Student Affairs and his student sup-



Meacham Auditorium was dramatically improved in the Union remodeling. Features include a powerful \$125,000 sound system, 35mm and 16mm film projectors, long-throw video and slide capability.

port staff occupy the south end's second floor.

Gothic-style chandeliers hang over an oak parquet floor in the redecorated Union Ballroom, which seats 600. Debbie Steele, OMU's assistant administrator, recounts some surprises uncovered by the Ballroom reconstruction.

"On the west side, workers tore down a wall and discovered an orchestra balcony overlooking the Ballroom," she says. "On the south side they uncovered another arch where windows had been placed before the north addition had been built. We reopened the arches to those windows in the renovation, and they've added to the beauty."

Steele was concerned that after a two-and-one-half-year absence, the Ballroom's rental customers would not return. "That didn't happen," she says. "We've got more business than we can handle."

Jerry Tarver, OMU manager of facilities, admits that maintaining a building as large and as old as the Union challenges his staff. "The building is almost 200,000 square feet, and some of the pipes and infrastructure are 70 years old. We spend a lot of time caring for this old girl. She has been good to me and the countless thousands that pass through her doors every day."

Tarver's staff ensures all areas are cleaned and prepared for the daily events. "From air conditioning to room setups, we make sure visitors are comfortable," Tarver says. "One weekend we had over 4,000 students for our annual 'Nite at the Union.' Everyone had a great time."

Stroud says architects strove to attain the original feel of the Union.

"One example of how existing features have been used in a new way involves wall lighting," Stroud says. "We've fabricated column bases into light fixtures, which appear as wall sconces throughout the building to achieve a common theme."

The same care went into restoring the elegance of the Beard Lounge, long a favorite spot for students. Ceiling

beams have been returned to the original look. The mock wall crack painted over the fireplace gives an antique feel. Students can browse free copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and local newspapers. A large bookshelf on the north wall displays 450 books published by the University of Oklahoma Press. During study breaks, students play the baby grand piano.

Judging from their increased attendance, OU students approve of the "new" Union. Norman junior Brad McMullan, OU Student Association president, says, "Renovations to the Union Ballroom are incredible, combining beauty and utility. The sliding doors in the adjoining Governors, Scholars and Associates rooms make it possible to have one large event or four smaller ones simultaneously. In the state-of-the-art computer center students can work on papers, check their e-mail or research the Internet. I love the new and improved Beard Lounge. This room, so open and invit-



John Jernigan

ing, signifies the commitment and direction taken by the administration toward students. The comfortable furniture, beautiful art and fireplace make students feel at

home. No wonder so many students love to study and relax there."

Faculty enjoy the updated Union as well. Renowned Broadway baritone Thomas Carey, Regents Professor of Music, has performed throughout his career at Meacham Auditorium.

"Designers have turned Meacham into a charming, intimate theater, reminiscent of facilities found in Europe, where chamber operas and concerts are presented with great success," Carey says. "The room was exactly right for Cimarron Circuit Opera Company's run of 'La Pizza Con Funghi,' a hilarious spoof of opera. The intimacy added to the audience's enjoyment. Our guest from the Metropolitan Opera, Gil Wechsler, was thrilled and surprised by the ability to demonstrate his laser disc presentations of performances for which he had designed the lighting. The multimedia technology featured excellent sound and large-screen projections. Mr. Wechsler was very complimentary." *continued*



John Jernigan

Decorator Steve Callahan purchased some antique, carved pedestals in Texas with no special purpose in mind—until he found the perfect fit beneath the 27-foot conference table in the Justice Alma Wilson Room on the Union's second floor.



John Jernigan



Meacham's \$125,000 sound system is complemented by 35mm and 16mm film projectors, long-throw video and slide capability. "Besides the Beaird Lounge, Meacham shows the most dramatic change," Stroud says. "One interesting anecdote: We decided to reupholster the original seats. When we

removed them to redo the floor, we had to change some configurations for handicap accessibility. Then we couldn't fit all the seats in again. Also, the seats are two different sizes. We lost some seating, but we still accommodate 407 people. Customers love the old-style look with a store front,

"In many ways, the Union is the real community center for both the University and the city of Norman."

ticket booth and wall murals."

Stroud says the biggest challenge was continuing service and maintaining the Union, which did not close during renovation. "Another challenge was constant change. We did not anticipate Phases II and III initially. When we neared completion of Phase I, we had to jump right back into Phase II."

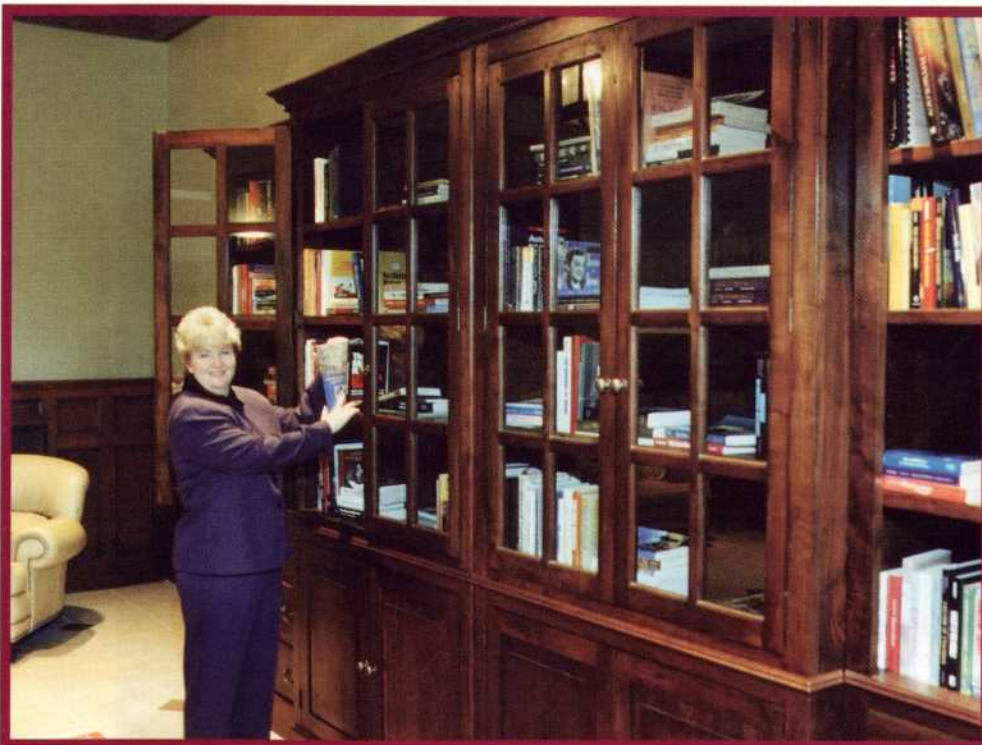
President Boren is excited by the results of the renovation.

"In many ways, the Union is the real community center for both the University and the city of Norman," he says. "To build a sense of community, it is important that there be a central place where many members of the community congregate. The new renovations are helping the Union truly become a core of the campus. We have relocated administrative offices in order to claim the central space for student use. Where the Union once resembled little more than an office building, we have now created meeting rooms and lounge space for students.

"In addition, we will, for the first time, establish a student leadership center in the Union to provide central office space for more than 50 student

Above: The Union Ballroom, here set for a fine arts support organization event, is booked solid by groups that found banquet facilities in short supply during the two-year renovation.

Left: Union assistant administrator Debbie Steele replaces a book in the case lining the north wall of the Beaird Lounge. Originally stocked with approximately 450 University of Oklahoma Press titles, the Union staff routinely restocks the shelves with other books abandoned throughout the building, resulting in a more diverse collection.





Refurbishing of the Will Rogers Room, with its murals portraying the life of the famous Oklahoman, is nearing completion. Next summer, OU art instructor Louise Jones will add murals depicting the chronological development of student life from the late 1800s forward.

organizations. The center will encourage cooperation among all student groups and establish a sense of family.”

OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren contributed her sense of style and taste throughout the project. She made suggestions on improving hallways, carpet and upholstery colors, fixtures, stenciling and adding the mission benches and chairs to the Stuart Land-

ing. “In the restoration, we have sought to instill tradition and a strong sense of time and place,” Mrs. Boren says. “We have used the decorative arts of the periods of the building, including mission-style furniture and art nouveau, art deco and Southwestern themes. The building also includes historic photographs of student life, creating a shared family history for OU students.”

The Union renovation brings back special childhood memories for Sally Beaird Hignite, daughter of Ted Beaird. Decades ago, Sally often accompanied her father to work. During a recent tour of the Union, she marveled at the resto-

ration of a place she holds dear.

“As I entered the lounge, memories rushed over me,” she says. “In 1952 I unveiled the portrait of my dad at the Beaird Lounge dedication. The construction and renovations he had worked so hard for, up to the time of his death, were complete. I remembered playing hopscotch on the black and white tiles that were once the hallway to Dad’s office. I would ride the elevator up and down—until he found out. Eating in the cafeteria was fun except for the carrots that were always put on my plate, even though I never ordered them. Later I found that the servers had *their* orders!”

“World War II exploded, and even though Dad had served in World War I, he pulled strings in Washington so he could join the Army Air Corps. For three years I had to leave my playground, my second home, my Union. The place I could sit on the basement floor behind the counter and read all the comic books for free! The place where my best friend, Deonne Drake Moore, daughter of former OU Basketball Coach Bruce Drake, and I could go to the soda fountain and get



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Veteran facilities manager Jerry Tarver, standing on the Union roof under the Clock Tower, lovingly oversees 200,000 square feet of heavily used space, much of it 70 years old.

a huge ice cream cone for ten cents.”

Ironically, although practically raised in the Union, Sally Hignite attended the University of Denver. She married, and both of her children graduated from OU—Pam Hignite Bruner, ’75 B.B.A., and Michael Hignite, ’83 B.A. When they were students, they would visit the lounge named for the grandfather they never knew, Sally says. When they had their own children, they brought them to see his portrait.

“A passerby,” Sally recalls, “observing me looking at my dad’s picture, said, ‘This is such a beautiful place. It’s a shame he’s not here to see it.’ I replied, ‘He sees it; he *is* here.’ Thanks to all those involved in the renovation of the Ted Beaird Lounge, he will always be here.

“I urge all students, alumni, friends, parents, teachers and citizens of Oklahoma to enjoy the beauty of the Ted Beaird Lounge. Then relax, visit and explore the rest of the new Union. All of Oklahoma can be proud.”