



# postscript. An Enduring Union

**O**f all the buildings on the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus, none has adapted to the fluctuating needs and desires of the student population like Oklahoma Memorial Union. The grand, red-brick and white-stone, collegiate-Gothic structure has been expanded, remodeled, reconfigured and refurbished for succeeding generations of Sooners since 1929.

The Union is an architectural icon, the center of current campus activities and firmly entrenched in alumni memories. Is it any wonder then that OU officials reacted with alarm when certain of the Union's walls began moving of their own accord, ever so slightly?

The building's custodians were the first to notice that something was wrong when sawdust and paint chips began to appear and reappear on third-floor window sills. Close inspection by experts revealed that the lintels, the horizontal beams above the windows, were sliding down and pushing against the walls. The movement was only a couple of inches, but in structural terms, that is cause for immediate action.

In October, a construction contract for more than \$1 million was let, scaffolding and a giant crane went up, some of the brick came off, certain third-floor meeting facilities were closed and pedestrian traffic restricted. Fortunately the Molly Shi Boren Ballroom, scene of so many of the University's major events, remained in operation and all other Union activities went on as usual.

When the original Union was built in 1929, it was literally in the center of a campus whose amazing expansion to the south was still decades away. The decision was made to construct the shell of the building, filling in the interiors as money became available. The price tag was \$350,000, part of a million-dollar private funding campaign—the University's

first—that also included construction of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

The ground floor of the new building contained the book exchange and a cafeteria that was to become Norman's favorite after-church dinner destination as well as serving the daily dining, catering and coffee break needs of students and faculty. The south wing of the ground

ministration project in 1936. The building found its voice in 1955 with the installation of the carillon bells.

When the University's enrollment exploded with the return of WWII veterans, so did the need for more space to accommodate their activities, nearly all centered around the Union. The north and south wings, the latter containing Meacham Auditorium, were opened in 1951, at a cost of \$2.3 million.

OU's facility expansion was not restricted to the Union, however. The post-war construction boom saw academic buildings and dormitories sweeping south to Lindsey Street and beyond, leaving the Union isolated on the north edge of the campus. From the late '50s to the late '70s, only its banquet facilities kept the Union in the flow of campus life.

Then in the early '80s, the trend began to reverse with the relocation of the student affairs offices bringing more students back to the Union and the construction of the Union Parking Garage making it more accessible. But its full recovery waited for the 1994 arrival of OU's 13th president, David Boren, and his wife, Molly Shi Boren, who spearheaded a 34-month, \$11.5 million top-to-bottom Union makeover.

The result was dazzling, and the students responded with their feet; the Union was back in business. In addition to complete redecorating and stunning new furnishings, the building gained space in the Clarke-Anderson Room adjacent to the Will Rogers Room, where a food court had replaced the cafeteria, and the westside Archie W. Dunham Conoco Student Leadership Center, now home to a plethora of student organizations.

The latest construction project, to conclude in March, will leave no such dramatic signs of change to the 78-year-old structure—but rest reassured, the Union walls will be standing strong for generations of future Sooners. —CJB



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Scaffolding went up on both the east and west sides of Oklahoma Memorial Union this fall to enable construction workers to remove the brick and strengthen support for the horizontal roof beams that were gradually sliding down and pressing against the walls of the building's north extension. Full access to the third-floor facilities closed by the emergency repairs was expected by March.

floor was devoted to a large open space containing five pool tables, a snooker table, a billiard table and two regulation-sized bowling alleys.

The first floor was occupied by the offices of the Alumni Association, *Sooner Magazine* and the Union manager; a game or card room, serving as a men's lounge; and space for an eventual women's lounge and reading room. On the second floor were student organization offices, meeting and conference rooms, and an "impressive new ballroom" featuring an orchestra stage and side balconies outfitted as lounges with bridge tables for the chaperones.

The Union acquired its architectural focal point with the addition of its 99-foot clock tower, a Works Progress Ad-