

*Today the Union stands as a landmark of the campus. An integral part of student life, accepted as a necessity, welcomed as a convenience, it was not so*

# In The Beginning

By Boyd Gunning, '37ba, '37Law

Glancing back over the history of the recently completed Student Memorial Union Building at the University, is like thumbing through the family picture album. A group of the best known and most distinguished alumni have set the policies and directed the management of this important center of student life on the campus since it was opened on November 22, 1928.

Two men who have served on the governing board of the Union from the time when it was merely a fund-raising idea to the present are Edgar D. Meacham, '14ba, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and A. N. "Jack" Boatman, '14ba, '16Law, Okmulgee. Appropriately enough both have served the University in many capacities, and their service has been a major force in the growth and development of this institution over a period of a quarter of a century.

Although in the early days the Union Building was severely criticized and was confronted with many strange and diverse difficulties, the building has a record of outstanding success on the campus as a center of student activities and a focusing point for graduates of the University who return to the campus for a visit. The difficulties have merely provided a little excitement, and in many instances, warm humor which is always present on a college campus.

The idea of a Student Union Building on the campus was first conceived in 1916. However, these early plans were interrupted by the coming of World War I and discarded for the time being. When the YMCA Building burned to the ground in 1922, a group of students and University officials began to think and plan again for a Union Building type of student center.

About this same time, Bennie G. Owen, then head of athletics, was wishing and planning for a new football stadium. The groups involved decided to combine forces and promote the construction of a Stadium-Union under one general campaign. This would require the raising of considerable money from solicitation of funds among the alumni and other interested individuals. The goal was set at a million dollars, of which six hundred-fifty thousand was to be earmarked for the stadium, and three hundred-fifty thousand for the Union Building.

After several false starts a board of trustees was finally organized and held its first meeting on April 14, 1925. This group elected Frank Buttram, '10ba, '12ma, Oklahoma City, president; J. S. Buchanan, (deceased) president of the University, vice-president; Richard H. Cloyd, '19ba, '28ba, Oklahoma City, secretary, and R. W. Hutto, '10ba, Norman, treasurer. Mr. Hutto was treasurer of the Stadium-Union Fund

throughout the period of its existence. Mr. B. S. "Chebie" Graham, '24 Oklahoma City and Sulphur, was chosen as campaign director.

Other trustees selected at that time and most of whom served on the several governing boards of the organization for many years to come included such well-known Sooners as Ben G. Owen, Edgar D. Meacham, A. N. "Jack" Boatman, Neil R. Johnson, '13ba, '17Law, Errett R. Newby, '07mus, '08ba, C.C. Roberts, '01ba, (deceased) Tom F. Carey, '08ba, (deceased) Emil R. Kraettli, '18, Nelly Jane McFerran, '15ba, Raymond Tolbert, '12ba, '13Law, Robert H. Wood, '11ba.

Actually the first money to be raised by the Stadium-Union fund came from an auction of two bird dogs at the Homecoming game played between Missouri and Oklahoma in 1922. According to Guy Y. Williams, '06ba, '10ma, then and now professor of chemistry at the University who generously donated the dogs for the occasion, it was at this time that the dog first became known as "man's best friend."

The auction brought \$850.00 It was on Armistice Day, November 11, 1924, that the Union Fund began to function in earnest. A crew of 200 workers started "alumni hunting" on that day and within four days they had accounted for \$217,000.00, and by February 10, 1925, three months later, a full million dollars had been pledged and \$409,910.00 actually had been collected.

The 2-5-0 Club was formed as a part of this fund-raising campaign. The requirements for membership were simple — \$250.00 contributed to the fund. All members of this club were to receive free football tickets to O.U. home games for life.



A flashback catches Ted Baird, '21ba, (deceased) formerly executive secretary of the Alumni Association; Dr. George L. Cross, president of the University, and Edgar D. Meacham, '14ba, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, examining the excavation for the Union wings as construction starts.

There are about two hundred 2-5-0 Club members who receive these benefits, and some of these are still taking advantage of the privileges which were extended to them.

The original architectural drawings showed the Union Building as a part of the football stadium, however, as plans for construction developed, the present location of both structures became a more obvious decision.

Considerable effort was made to popularize the idea of a Union Building among the students. One sign posted around the campus to stimulate interest in the Union was "Harvard has one, Michigan has one, Cornell has a million for one—why not O.U." Mass meetings were held in the University auditorium to discuss the advantages of a Union Building and students were promised "No collections will be made."

A tract of land consisting of two acres was leased by the Union Corporation under authority of a bill passed by the Ninth Legislature. One of the statements found in the general proposal for the building promised that "one wing is so to be arranged as to be private and will have a matron's apartment. Here girls may come for University functions and be under careful chaperonage."

An early leader in the work to bring about construction of a Union Building was Eugene Faulkner, '23ba, (deceased). Faulkner's idea grew from the realization that there was no place on the campus where all students could meet and entertain their parents or other out-of-town guests. He thought the campus needed a building which would serve as a common meeting place for parents, students and alumni.

Sorey and Vahlberg, Oklahoma City, were selected as architects and the first plans and sketches for the original building were completed in 1924. The building finally emerged as one of the nation's best. The test of time has proved the basic design to be practical and flexible enough to meet the changing requirements of such a building. The Union has remained a Sorey product. All additions, including the two new wings, came off the drawing board in Sorey's office.

No one could imagine in the fall of 1928 all the mischief the youthful Union was to be accused of. This is probably just as well for if all the difficulties could have been foreseen, the building might still be just an idea.

For a good portion of its early childhood days everything, except compliments, was thrown at the Union. Grabbing its share of headlines and space on court dock-



The three men who held the position of executive secretary of the Alumni Association before present secretary Boyd Gunning, '37ba, '37Law, posed for picture before death of the late Ted Beard. Left to right: Richard Cloyd, '19ba, '28Law, Oklahoma City; Frank Cleckler, '21ba, Oklahoma City, and Beard, '21ba. Beard died in April, 1950.

ets, the Union managed to survive all the fire and brimstone that was so consistently tossed in its direction.

Stories ranging from just interesting chatter to lurid exaggerations appeared in the state's papers.

To give you a review of the Union's early but stormy days, here's the general run of things during the first year, 1928-29, after the Union had been erected, as it appeared in the *Sooner Magazine* of October, 1938.

"September 18—A group of students protested the University's collection of a Union fee, although it had been approved previously by a student vote.

"November 22—Union Building was open for student use.

"January 1—Union's departments showed a heavy loss for the first month's operation.

"January 10—Formal opening of the building held.

"January 10—B. S. Graham, who had been director of the Stadium-Union campaign, resigned as manager of the Union.

"January 19—Suit filed in district court by students to prevent collection of Union fee by University.

"January 31—Manager of billiard room arrested by city officers on charge of op-

erating pool tables without city license.

"February 1—County assessor announced effort would be made to collect ad valorem taxes on the Union Building."

Though some of the problems were just time consuming and others provoking, there were a few occasions when the future of the Union was threatened. The tangible evidence of the Union's growth and usefulness is testimony enough that the important wrinkles were straightened out. Students lost their suit in district court protesting the University's collection of a Union fee. Upon a hearing of an appeal, the State Supreme Court handed down a decision January 17, 1933, which unanimously upheld the University's position.

Quoting from their decision: "The requirement that each student pay \$2.50 Student Union fee each semester is not prohibited by any constitution or statutory provision, and is within the implied power of the University Board of Regents."

Frank Cleckler, '21ba, who in 1928 was made executive secretary of the University of Oklahoma Association, took over the management of the Union after Graham resigned. Cleckler solved the administrative problems of operating a cafeteria, ballroom, billiard and bowling room, news stand and other student services.



Joe Curtis, '20ba, '22Law, Pauls Valley, and D. H. Grisso, '30geol, Norman, look over the first prints of photographs of the interior of the new Union. Both men are past presidents of the Association and are now members of the Union Board of Governors.

Lack of funds postponed the completion of the Union in 1928. The main lounge was left with bare concrete and tile walls. The South Wing of the main floor was unfinished, and temporary wallboard partitions were put up so that the space could be used for University classrooms. But even with this handicap the Union's popularity grew and by 1936 a check of the number of entries into the Union in one day tallied 6,000 persons.

During the depression, Cleckler faced default of bond payments. The expected football receipts and payments on the \$650,000 Stadium-Union Fund pledges, designed to meet a big percentage of the bond retirements, dwindled almost to nothing. A bond payment went into technical—though not actual—default and Cleckler realized that any bondholder who wished could throw the Stadium-Union project into receivership. Union officials and alumni held tense sessions and worked out an agreement with the bondholders for a part-payment schedule that satisfied them. When the financial condition of the fund improved, the original schedule of bond retirements was resumed.

Another shaky incident confronted

Cleckler in 1931 when the State Legislature decided to investigate the Union. The investigation was provoked by some merchants bickering about "unfair competition," and religious groups questioning the type of amusement students found inside the Union's protective walls. The only memorable part of the investigation was when a student witness took the stand to testify about gambling in the Union and stated he had without a doubt overheard another student in the pool room say, "I'll bet you a dime I'll put the nine ball in the side pocket."

Writing in the *Oklahoma City Times*, Walter Harrison joshed at the investigators for exposing such a "sink of iniquity."

Harrison commented:

"All of this howl about the Student-Union Building at Norman is witless.

Judging from the statements of the merchants in Norman, the Student-Union is responsible for the price of cotton, the limited proration in the Oklahoma City oil field and the price of bread. There is no other cause for the depression in and around Norman except the Student-Union with its cafeteria, its billiard hall, its book exchange where students can get text books at cost.



Two Alumni who have been active in the Association and who served on the Union Board of Governors since its inception in 1928 look over an alumni report. They are Errett Newby, '07mus, '08ba, Oklahoma City, and Neil Johnson, '15ba, '17Law, Norman.

"The Student Union is the poor boy's fraternity house."

"It is accepted as a worthy and necessary part of the well established University throughout the land. Some colleges call it the commons, others a club, still others a union—but its objects and furnishings are the same everywhere. They kick about its being established on land that belongs to the University. Why shouldn't it be? It is as much a building devoted to the service of the student body as the chemistry hall, and is used a much greater portion of every working day and night and Sunday too.

"Long may the Student-Union wave."

After hearing an array of witnesses and pondering over a goodly sum of documentary evidence, the Senate investigating committee reported that it found no irregularities in the Union, and that the finances had been handled in a judicious manner.

The Union's popularity has become solidified as far as student support is concerned and in general has been accepted as an important and essential institution on the campus. It has become the hub of campus life.

This story would not be complete if it did not mention another tangle which the Union ran into with the state's administration in 1940 during Leon C. "Red" Phillips, '16Law, term as governor. Newspaper articles disclose that the O.U. alumnus, governor Phillips, made the Union and his fellow alumnus, Ted Beaird, '21ba, secretary of the Alumni Association, one of the issues in his gubernatorial campaign two years previous. Delivering a speech in Norman in the midst of his campaign, Phillips stated his first official act after being elected governor would be to fire Beaird. Phillips asserted that Beaird had been living for years in "regal splendor" in one of the large apartments of the Memorial Union. Although Beaird 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. Since the facts were all on Beaird'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.

Being able to withstand every criticism and make an honest defense of all accusations hurled toward it makes the Union worthy of its dedication. A rectangular bronze plaque just inside the main entrance states earnestly and simply:

"This Building Is Dedicated to the Memory of the Graduates and Former Students of the University of Oklahoma Who

Gave Their Lives in the World War. 1917-18."

In the foyer of the Union is the Memorial Plaque left by the class of 1944. Their classmates in service too, had served their University, their state and their country well.

"Proudly We Pay Tribute to the O.U.



"I refuse to be stereotyped," said Robert D. Harrell, interior designer and decorator of the new Memorial Union Building. The Union shows he isn't. The noted designer went to all ends to live up to his statement.

Harrell mixed the paints for the walls to make sure they would fit into the scheme. He designed the furniture, lamps, rugs and even mixed the pigments for the Will Rogers murals in the cafeteria so they would blend in with the rest of the design.

No frills and fancywork clutter up the Union's interior. You aren't afraid to touch the fixtures for the rooms' atmosphere invite you instead of having an aloof hands-off appearance. This is all in keeping with the designer's theme of "beauty through simplicity."

Harrell, for 25 years a leader in his profession, did all the interior designing, decorating and furnishing for the nationally famous Shamrock Hotel in Houston. He heads Robert D. Harrell, Inc., the original creators of International Modern Motif, with offices in Los Angeles, Houston and Oklahoma City.

Alumni Who Gave Their Lives in World War II."

The Union grew steadily, both in popularity and in the completion of the physical plant. One of the most noticeable changes in the Union's structure was the erection in 1936 of the 99-foot tower, provided for in the original architects plan. The Union tower loomed up on the Norman skyline so prominently that it has become a familiar signature of Norman itself. The tower was placed on the Union as a result of a \$30,000 WPA project.

The barn-like space originally intended for the main lounge was finished as a fine oak lounge with comfortable and beautiful furnishings in the winter of 1937-38. Part of the same project converted the old Alumni and Union office space into two dining rooms, the Woodruff Room and the English Room, and the offices on the west side of the south wing of the main floor were finished. This project also done with WPA help, cost about \$27,000, including furnishing the lounge.

Flipping the pages rapidly now one catches fleeting views of Flings, Dansants, bridge tourney's, splash parties and billiard playoffs that sprang from the minds of a flippant fun-loving group utilizing the Union.

In 1945, under the direction of Ted Beaird, plans were made for the expansion of the Union. However, it was April of 1947 before the Board of Regents reached an agreement with the Union's Board of Governors on the \$2,300,000 expansion program that provided for the present additions to the Union.

It was April 15, 1950, when the popular Rider of the Sooner Range, Ted Beaird, hung up his boots and spurs. The students, the faculty, the University and the state all lost a favorite friend. Ted's contribution to the building of the Union was more important than that of any other single person. In appreciation of his outstanding service, the main lounge has been dedicated to his memory and his portrait hangs in this magnificent room. Hillyer Freedland, '38fa, for several years assistant manager under Ted, has moved up to the management of the building.

As the Memorial Union enters this new period its function on the campus is well-defined. This understanding should make it a center of ever greater service to students and alumni of the University.

(Ed. Note. *A list of all of those men and women who have served on the Board of Governors since its inception plus a brief analysis of changes in Constitution and By-Laws is found on page 56.*)