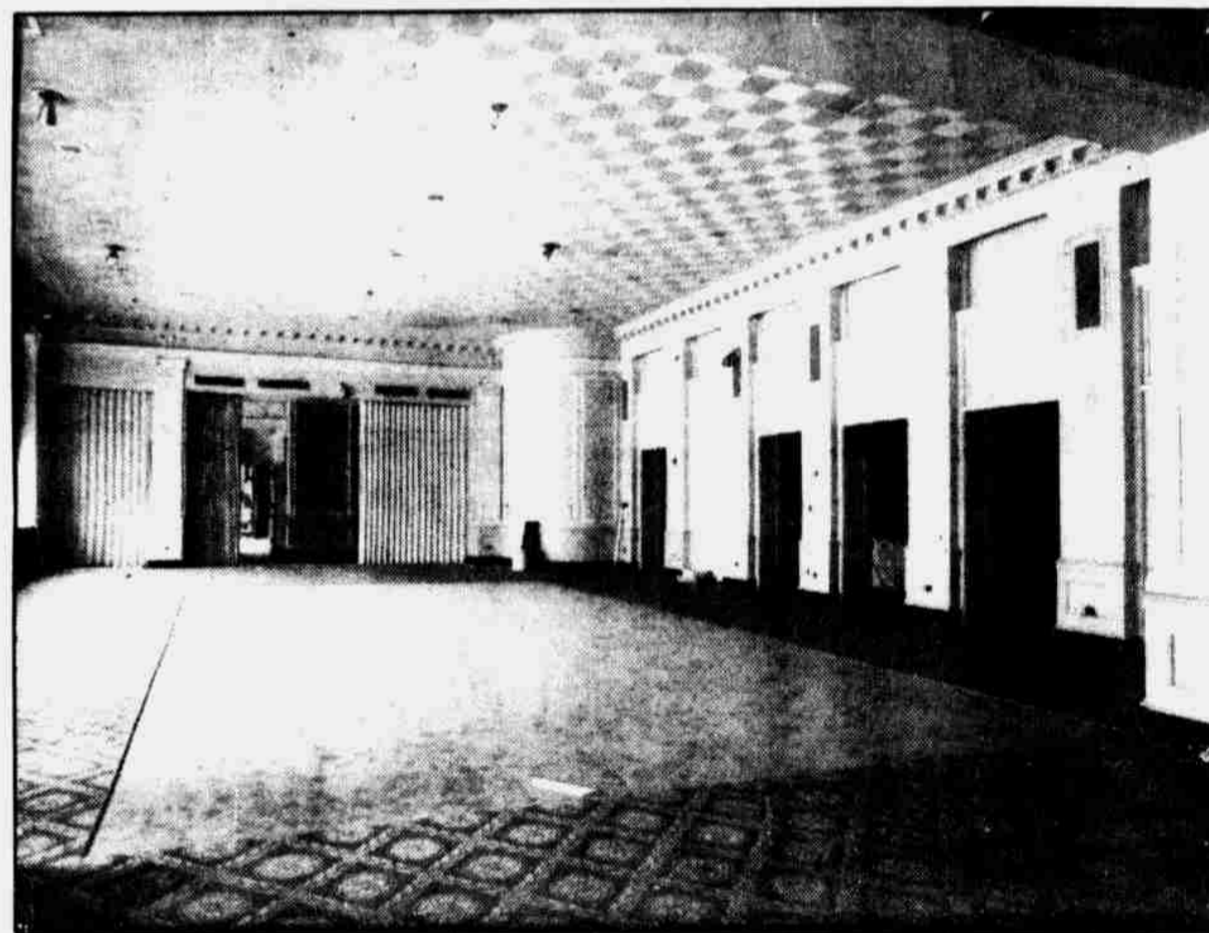


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Top row, left to right: The A.Q. Schimmel coat of arms on the door of the elevator; the front of the Cornhusker Hotel; a stone face above a window. Bottom row, left to right: John Novak stands in the lobby; the ballroom.



## Engineer repaints hotel with years of memories

Memories: That's what the Cornhusker Hotel is to John Novak.

Memories of noisy conventioners drinking and laughing. Memories of college students attending formal balls and storybook dances. Faded visions of people from across the United States filling the lobby, each hoping to forget the troubles of the outside world and trying to enjoy the magic of an hour or two in the Cornhusker.

Although the hotel stands with its entrances locked, its utilities shut off and its lobby and rooms stripped of furnishings, to Novak it is more than a shell waiting demolition.

"I know every room, every inch of this hotel, and I should. I worked here for 45 years," Novak, 68, said while standing in the lobby. "I started working at the hotel in 1936, crushing ice for liquor. I would run 2,000 pounds of ice a day through the crushing machine. On football Saturdays, I would work 11 hours, crushing 7,000 pounds of ice, and the hotel would still have to send someone to go out and buy more."

Novak eventually was promoted from ice chipper to porter and helped guests carry and unpack their suitcases. He also helped them to their rooms when they had too much to drink.

"I never minded helping guests when they drank too much," he said. "Oh, they cursed me a lot but that was about the worst of it. They never gave me much of a problem."

Novak left the Cornhusker to fight in World War II. Upon returning home, he worked as the hotel's engineer until the Cornhusker closed to business in 1979.

Built in 1926 for \$1.5 million, the 350-room hotel was owned by the Lincoln Hotel Co. until 1930, when the Schimmel family bought it. A.Q. Schimmel managed the hotel and made it into a thriving convention center. The hotel was sold in 1968 to the Radisson Company, which closed the Cornhusker two years ago. Soon after, First National Bank bought the building.

The hotel, located at 13th and M streets, and a neighboring apartment building will be razed Feb. 21 to make way for the new \$41 million Cornhusker Square.

Cornhusker Square is a joint project of the city and Murdock Management. The square will be the site of a 300-room hotel, a convention center and a parking garage.

As Novak walked through the lobby and stepped around the debris that littered the stairs and floors, he seemed unaware of the declining condition of the building.

He looked at the south wall of the lobby where the registration desk had stood and recalled the names of guests. Through the years, such noted guests as Elvis Presley, Robert Kennedy, Johnny Carson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller and Orson Welles stayed at the hotel.

Novak's gaze moved north where a staircase led to a large open area of the lobby.

"That area was the mezzanine," he said. "Anyone — guests or visitors — could go up there and sit and watch TV. The area was open to the public and the hotel did not try to prevent anyone from using it. People could come in and sit down and rest or warm up. Nobody bothered them."

East of the mezzanine was a wall of French doors. Behind them was the dining room, which originally had been a ballroom. It was the site of many University of Nebraska social functions.

Each year, the military ball and the formal dances of the sororities and fraternities were at the hotel. Phi Beta Phi sorority opened the formal season then and the Kappa Delta traditionally closed it. The spring season began with the Alpha Tau Omega Storybook Ball. People dressed as Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Sonja Henie and Hitler waltzed around the dance floor, and storybook scenes covered the walls.

During World War II, Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity sponsored a dance at which guests were admitted only after they presented a phonograph record. The records were given to the United Service Organization for use in the group's military entertainment projects.

Through the years, guests danced to the music of string quartets and small jazz bands. Groups like Leo Beck, and Pat Ash and His Cinders performed in the room. During the hotel's early years, KFAB radio had a studio at one

end of the ballroom and broadcast live shows during the dances.

In 1938, the ballroom became a dining room, and a larger ballroom was added to the west side of the hotel.

Novak walked over and tapped a pane in the French doors. He explained that the glass had to be replaced with painted wood.

"We had to buy glass by the ton," he said. "We got tired of having to replace the panes all the time because someone would drink too much and throw a bottle or glass through the window. So we replaced them with wood."

Leading the way through a back stairway that ended in the main kitchen, Novak recalled the commotion caused by cooks racing to prepare meals for hungry patrons. He walked to the back service entrance and pointed to the door that he used to enter the hotel everyday at 7 a.m. and exit when his work was done between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m.

"It was hard working seven days a week for that many hours," he said. "You can imagine what kind of strain that put on a marriage."

Novak walked back through the kitchen and down a flight of stairs leading to what was the hotel's main restaurant, the Landmark. Across from The Landmark was another restaurant called the Tee-Pee, originally called the Tasty Pastry.

The Tasty Pastry was a meeting place for many generations of college students. Couples met their friends and dined on beef levi sandwiches, shoestring potatoes and Russian mint milkshakes.

Novak questioned whether the new convention center will be a success because of the time lapse between the Cornhusker's closing and the convention center's opening.

"During that time period, people have learned to go somewhere else. It's going to be hard to get them to come back to Lincoln," he said.

Even though the Cornhusker holds so many memories for him, Novak said he would "rather see it come down than remain in its present state. I even asked to push the button when they blow it up."