

Glenn Miller, demonstrations... once upon a time, not long ago

By Eilyn Hess

They wore saddle shoes, baggy pants, argyle socks and sweater sets. Some of them fought in a war overseas.

They were enthusiastic football fans and they played registration roulette almost every semester.

It's been 30 years since NU coeds jitterbugged to Glenn Miller or snacked on 10-cent brownies a la mode in the Union, but much of the way they were is alive in students' fashions and attitudes of the '70s.

UNL students today don't usually wear ties to class or plaster their hair with Dixie Peach Pomade or fluff it pompadour style. Slacks have replaced skirts for women. And tight-fitting sweaters are worn instead of the bulky cardigans of the past.

Like his modern counterpart, the typical male NU student in the '40s pulled on sweater vests with corduroy sport jackets and trousers. Parents often frowned at his hair length.

Women students wore high platform shoes comparable to those which designers would have fashion-conscious women buy today. They painted their lips ruby red and frizzed long hair out at the ends.

Almost every coed's wardrobe included a fur coat, preferably muskrat. They wore jeans then, but with a difference. Women's pants zipped up the side.

Proms, military balls and the Coed Follies variety show were must-do's, and on most weekends, two or three couples would pile into cars and head for the dance at a ballroom outside Lincoln.

Liquor wasn't sold by the drink then, but that didn't stop anyone from drinking, according to Mrs. Ruth (Moll) Boehmer, a student at NU from 1945 to 1948.

"We'd go dancing at places like East Hills Country Club, where the boys usually would have some liquor with them, to spike whatever was served," she said.

Neale Copple, director of the UNL School of Journalism, said he thinks that there was more drinking at NU in the '40s than there is now, but that it was done more quietly.

Copple, a NU student during the '40s, said World War II changed the atmosphere of the campus in that decade.

"During the first year of the forties," he said, "students didn't worry much about war." Things changed after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, he said.

"From that point on," he said, "the boys were very much aware that they were going into the service." Copple said professors were very sympathetic, often allowing students to register for more than 21 credit hours.

Boehmer recalled that there "were hardly any fellows" on campus when she started school in September, 1945.

There weren't. In 1945, the male to female ratio was 1-1/3 to 1, compared with a 3-1/2 to 1 ratio in 1947. Total enrollment dropped from 6,000 in 1940 to 2,750 in 1944.

After 1945, the figure peaked at 9,730 in 1947. The increase occurred mainly because many students used the GI Bill to pay education costs, Copple said.

"We had the same trouble students have today when it came to registration and crowded classes," he said, adding that after World War II buildings similar to Quanset huts sat where the Love Library addition is today.

The scarcity of men during the war wasn't much fun for some of the older women students.

"I was lucky when I started college. Many of the boys my age hadn't been drafted," Boehmer said. But often it was hard for the older women to find dates, she added.

"I guess we spent a lot of weekends playing cards or going to the movies."

Once the men came back, though, social life picked up, she said. Every weekend there was dancing, and on some weekends, picnics or swimming at the Capitol Beach swimming pool.

Marcia (Tepperman) Kushner recalls that the men "looked terribly old and mature" when she attended NU from 1946 to 1950. She said that women, though generally younger than the men on campus, were often ahead of them academically.

"We knew the men were very serious students," Kushner said, "and that we would have to work very hard to get good grades against them."

She said fraternity hazing died down once the former servicemen returned to campus.

"Their lives had been in jeopardy", she said, "and they weren't going to submit to that monkeybusiness."

There was a demonstration in 1948 over—guess what—parking. It started at 12th and R streets and ended up at the Statehouse, according to Jim Tische, who was graduated in 1950.

At the time, Tische said, 12th Street ran in front of where the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery is now. The University didn't provide formal parking for students' cars on campus, he added.

One morning, Tische said, the Lincoln police tried to tow away students' cars which had been parked on



12th Street for more than an hour. A crowd gathered around the tow truck and let the air out of its tires.

"Somebody panicked and called the police, and before we knew it there were fire trucks there," he said, adding that students then let the air out of the fire truck's tires.

Police then threw tear gas into the crowd of several thousand students, Tische said. Soon after that the dean of the University asked police to leave the campus.

But students weren't satisfied, according to Tische, so 500 of them marched on O Street, blocking traffic, and then went to the police station.

When police told them that they couldn't solve the parking problem, they went to the Statehouse to demand more parking on campus, Tische said. They got it.

Kushner said she remembers that some eastern newspapers said the demonstration was communist-inspired. That was a joke around the campus, she said.

Tische said he thinks that while he was at college "students turned inward to campus life because they didn't think much about world problems."

Boehmer said she didn't know the names of national leaders in the 1940's, except for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"I don't even think I read the newspapers in those days," she said.

Kushner, the first Jewish woman elected Mortar Board women's honorary society president (in 1949), said that it was a step forward for NU women of her faith.

"Our house (Sigma Delta Tau) was kind of isolated from the other Greeks," she said, "and we didn't feel that we were in a position of power with them."

"When I was tapped Mortar Board president, it was a sign that we were really getting there, that we were being accepted and that we were making a contribution," Kushner said.

Kushner said she thought it odd that the Temple Building was still standing when she returned to UNL in 1969 to earn her masters' degree in audiology.

"I thought to myself, here I am sitting in the same building that was condemned 20 years ago," she said.

