

third dimension | the state of the union

# Mixed reactions greeted first Union

By Gail Smith

"May the new building and what it represents bring you unlimited happiness."

The "new building" was the University of Nebraska Student Union, and the wish for happiness came in an ad placed in the May 4, 1938 Daily Nebraskan by a local business, the State Market, 1429 O St.

The Union was opened May 4, 1938, and in a Daily Nebraskan editorial that day, Editor Helen Pascoe said, "Campus leaders of the past, Nebraska democrats and the alumni leaders will rejoice in a spirit of completion for the issue with which they struggled since 1930."

"The beautiful ballroom, spacious office rooms, and luxurious dining rooms of the Union will be unable to disclose the sleepless nights dedicated to their origin, the loss of friendship in the cause of their location, and the loss of life in view of their completion," Pascoe wrote. "A vast amount of potentialities are sealed within its walls. Whether they're fully uncovered will depend upon the enthusiasm and cooperation with which all students and faculty members receive it."

The Alumni Association, Innocents, Student Council, and the Daily Nebraskan fought for a Union.

**PWA funds used**

On Feb. 14, 1936, the NU Board of Regents approved a petition asking for Public Works Administration (PWA) funds for the Union.

The regents approved the PWA grant of more than \$400,000, but that amount had to be matched by the University, according to Allen Bennett, Union director since 1959. He says today that before 1938, the university sold public bonds to raise matching funds because the Legislature said general tax money was not available for the union project.

Bennett said the students in 1938 voted in an all-campus referendum to assess a student fee on themselves for repaying the bonds operating the Union and providing an activities program.

The building was furnished with gifts from businesses, alumni and citizens, he said.

**Union Board 38 years old**

There was a Union Board from the beginning, made up of faculty, alumni and students. The board made rules for the use of the building, exercised general control over finances and enforced the constitutional limitations of the Union.

One of the students on the board between 1937 and 38 was Robert Simmons, now a regent from Scottsbluff. Simmons studied law at NU from 1935-41. At that time, his family lived in Lincoln, so he lived at home.

When he attended NU, Simmons said, he was a member of the Student Council (then the student government), and he also was president of the "Barb Council." The "barbs," or "barbarians," were students who were not in Greek houses, Simmons said. The council had representatives from non-Greek clubs and organizations, he said, and they planned dances and other activities.

He was elected to the Union Board by the Student Council, Simmons said, adding that he thinks he was chosen because he represented the type of student that would use the Union. He said many persons thought the purpose of the Union was to provide a sort of "home away from home" for students who lived off campus or

didn't have any other place to go when they were not in classes.

Simmons said he doesn't think the Union fulfilled that purpose then. He said the Union's present location was west of the main campus area at that time, and many students were not in the Union area often. Some students worked in downtown businesses and went directly from classes to work without going by the Union or using it, he said.

And even after the Union was built, Simmons said, many students spent their free time the same way they had spent it before the Union was built—at parties in residence halls, fraternities and sororities, he said. They also "loafed" at the library or the "University Drug," which was at the corner of 14th and S Sts., he said. Many students lived in rooming houses near campus, he said, and in 1938 there were many clubs and literary societies.

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"Coking" was a favorite pastime for students who used the new Corn Crib in 1938.



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