

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Nifty Fifties 1950 - 1959

In the 1950s, the Residence underwent a dramatic change, as important a change as any in its history. And curiously enough, although the subtle alteration had less to do with the Residence itself than the campus around it, the Residence felt the greatest impact with these changes.

### Residence Life in the 1950s

The change was this. A campus building boom provided new facilities to the University community, while simultaneously diminishing the importance of the Residence as a meeting place.

In the centre of campus, the Bison Building offered new gymnasias and the Residence—its own gyms too small for intercollegiate play and its swimming pools filled with rubble after the war—slid into the shadows. Swimming practices and meets were now held at Sherbrook Pool in downtown Winnipeg.

With the construction of additional dining facilities during the war, the Dining Room (the Oak Room) surrendered its claim as the table at which the university faculty sat down to eat.

There was a change, too, in the way students saw themselves. The returning veterans in the

1940s, grown men and women who had risked all for their country, had little sympathy for the parental notions of the University. They challenged the popular conception of the university student as a child; they demanded a greater voice in the determination of their affairs.

Though the right to student self-governance dates back to the early days of the Manitoba Agricultural College, it began to find its real authority after the Second World War.

At the same time, discipline had to be maintained, and in January of 1950 it was reaffirmed from “On High” that the Men’s Residence House Committee had every authority to take whatever disciplinary steps it deemed necessary and that their remedial actions would be supported by the University Administration.

In the meantime, life was about to change once more for the Residence as a building, and also for the students who lived there.



■ The beautiful windows in the Dining Room (later named the Oak Room).



■ *The 1950 Flood eventually closed the campus.*



■ *The Veterans' Villages and the wartime huts behind the Manitoba Union Building seen during the 1950 Flood.*

## The 1950 Flood

At the end of April 1950, students had to hastily move out of the Residence during the devastating Red River Flood and 135 refugees from the town of Morris moved in. However, rising waters eventually forced everyone out.

Predictably, there was water damage in the aftermath of the flood, notably to the flooring in the Gyms, to the fencing around the skating rink, and in the curling rink ante-room.

As was mentioned earlier, the University had played a critical role in helping troops complete their education and re-enter civilian life following the Second World War. Accommodation for the returning veterans was provided for by means of temporary housing clustered around central utility buildings, called the “Veterans’ Villages.”

Three of the Veterans’ Villages were located south of the Drill Hall and the fourth one was built on the north part of the campus just west of the President’s House. However, due to the 1950 Flood, the Veterans’ Villages had a short life; they were essentially destroyed and few mourned their loss.

Thankfully, the wood frame huts built for the military during the late war, located between the Residence and the river, were more resilient than were the Veterans’ Villages to the ravages of the flood. The University put the huts to good use in dealing with the post-war demands for space until new facilities were constructed. Although they were not incorporated into the Manitoba Union infrastructure, they were situated in close proximity to the Residence building and were a familiar part of the built environment to Residence students.

A 1951 ground plan of the campus shows that these structures comprised the Staff Lounge

& Dining Room, the Chemistry Building and laboratories, an Architecture drafting building, and the Pharmacy Building.

As new accommodations came on stream during the decades that followed, some of these wartime relics changed hands among various faculties/departments until they were left vacant and eventually torn down.

### Students Enjoy a Greater Liberty

While the students of the 1950s were, in many ways, less serious than those of the preceding decade, they enjoyed a greater liberty. It is true that they may have stuffed themselves into the occasional phone booth, but they were assigned the title of young adults and were treated accordingly.

Specified hours when men and women could visit in assigned areas of the Residence were introduced. But there were many diversions in which the “young adults” were still forbidden to indulge.

In early January 1951 two men were kicked out of Residence for drinking. An ensuing open letter from the University President specified that further drinking would result not only in the offenders’ dismissal from Residence, but also suspension from the University for at least one year, if not for all eternity.

Instances of firecracker-throwing were among the least of the disruptions to visit the Residence community in 1951. In April of that year, some students descended into the campus subterranean tunnels and pulled the main electrical switches, including those that controlled the powerhouse. All the ice cream melted and there was a certain amount of food spoilage. This was apparently

not an isolated instance of this “prank,” and the authorities were duly upset. It is indeed a wonder what budding scholars could put their minds to, when the spirit moved them.

### Summer School

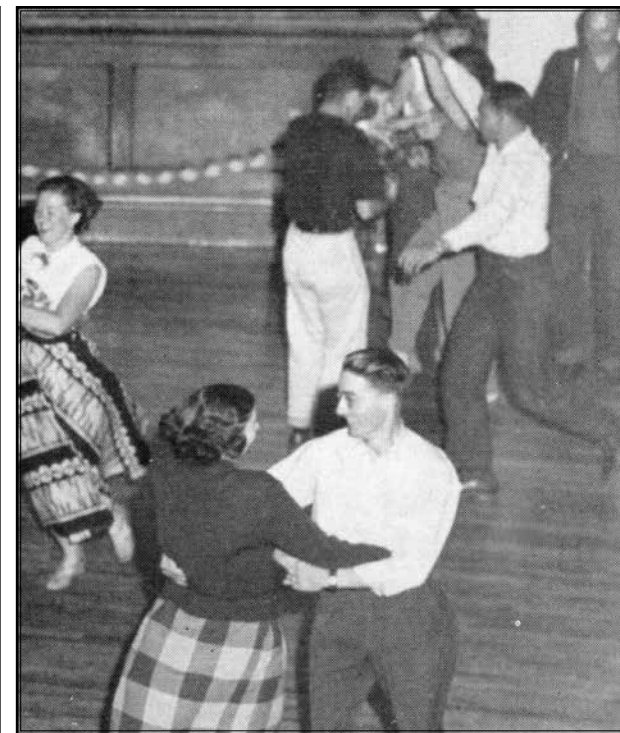
A slate of six-week-long summer courses was offered during July and August of 1951 in the faculties of Arts and Science and Education at the University. For the twelfth time since its inauguration in 1926, summer school facilities were made available to students who wanted to make up courses that they had missed the previous year, or to take additional subjects that they had been unable to squeeze into the regular time tables. Those students from out-of-town registered to live in Residence for the duration of their courses.

Also, 1951 saw the introduction into summer school of special evening classes for Ukrainian students. For the 675 students who had cut summer jobs in order to attend, the summer schedule also offered a full program of socials and athletics. Square dances and the Ukrainian Summer School Concert highlighted the series of Thursday evening events held in the Residence Auditorium.

Badminton, horseshoe-throwing, ping-pong, tennis, and volleyball facilities were kept busy, and a three-team softball league was organized amongst students living in Residence.

### The New Directors of Residence

In July 1953, a change was in the wind when, at the University’s Board of Governors’ meeting, it was agreed that the administration



■ Ukrainian students enjoy a square dance in the Residence Auditorium during their summer school sessions.



■ Summer students gather in the basement Canteen of the Manitoba Union.



■ Beatrice Brownlee, the University Dietitian, in 1952.

of the Residence should be centralized under the control of the Dietitian.

To accomplish this, it was considered necessary to obtain the services of a Director for each of the Residences. These Directors would perform the duties formerly undertaken by the Deans of Residence insofar as the allotting of rooms and the control of students were concerned. In addition to these tasks, they would also be responsible for managing the housekeeping details and other physical arrangements in the Residence building, under the overall supervision of the Dietitian. Both new Directors were to be hired in time for the upcoming academic year.

And so it was that Mrs. Clara Unwin moved into the Dean of Men's Residence suite to assume her role as the first "Director of Men's Residence" in August 1953. That same month Mrs. Alma Dickson became the "Director of Women's Residence" on the other side of the divide.

Another change of some significance was approved by the Board of Governors at its meeting of February 17, 1956: the rather ambiguous (if not misleading) name "Manitoba Union Building" was abolished and was replaced by the self-explanatory word "Residence." More specifically, "Women's Residence" and "Men's Residence" came to be the official designations of the respective Houses.



■ Listening to records in the East Lounge was a favourite pastime for the women.

## Women Residents Still Have a Curfew

By the mid-1950s, the Men's Residence was freely accessible by the guys on a 24-hour basis. However, the Women's Residence was still ruled with a curfew and the procedure of signing out and back in again.

To pick up a date, the fellows waited in the hall while the girl on door duty went to find whomever was wanted. For the women, returning late could mean a next-morning visit to the office of the Dean of Women's Residence—now Mrs. Vivian McKinnon, a formidable matron if ever there was one, had since replaced Mrs. Dickson. Mrs. McKinnon was a dignified, no-nonsense lady who was surely handpicked for the job.

Predictably, the women were interested in reforming the rather stifling regulations under which they had to live. For example, some of the more senior among them petitioned for more liberal leave arrangements. When attending events downtown, they were supposed to be back in the building by two o'clock in the morning. They wanted a later sign-in deadline, because it was sometimes difficult to make it back as early as 2:00 am.

Also, a girl's parents had to sign a *Leave Form* for each year that their daughter was in Residence. This agreement between the parents and the University governed the student's movements off the campus over the course of the year. The women felt that having their parents sign the form each and every year was a bit of over-kill, and proposed that the consent form from the previous year should be adequate. They got their wish, but only where the student was of "good academic standing," meaning that she had to achieve an average of at least 60%, with no failures.

## How Residents Spent Their Spare Time

Sadie Hawkins Dances were THE thing on November 15th. The gals cleared out the waste baskets to make “corsages” for the guys. A really good corsage reached below a fella’s knees.

The Residence Formal Dance was held in February in the Women’s Residence Gym. Long dresses, real corsages, suits and ties, as well as a punch bowl (non-alcoholic) were all part of it. “Jiving” was the main dance craze at that time.

And let’s not forget the TV Room—top of the stairs, opposite the front entrance in the Men’s Residence. TV was very new then, with only Valley City, CBC, and one other US station. The picture was incredibly snowy and was always watched in total darkness. There were continual complaints about getting stepped on, as newcomers to the room tried to find a place to sit in the dark with wall-to-wall bodies. Some of the shows watched were *The Ed Sullivan Show* on Sunday nights, Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*, and *I Love Lucy*.

Students during this time would “spirit” extra slices of bread from the Dining Room for later snacks. If not covered immediately, the bread became hard and dry in no time, so low in humidity were the rooms.

Army cot beds, a legacy of the war years, were easy to upset on room raids and could also be stacked to form bunk beds, leaving more floor space. As the story goes, one night a few fellows on 2nd Floor West took apart one of the cots and reassembled it outside on the roof of the West Gym, complete with mattress and blankets—in the snow!

One Friday night project involved bringing a VW Beetle or Morris Minor in by the front door with the intention of parking it outside the door of the Dean of Men’s Residence. The car got stuck on the stairs and spent most of the night there! All small cars at that time were considered a joke.

## The Telephone

There were three phones in the Men’s Residence, one by the front door, one near the entrance to the Dining Room, and one on the third floor.

Each room was assigned telephone duty about once every two months. From 7:00–9:00 pm, the duty person (and roommate, if available) would sit where the phone(s) could be heard, answer it, and then track down whoever was wanted. A list of Residents and their room numbers beside the



■ “Jiving” was the dance of the era.

■ Typical female and male dorm rooms in the 1950s. Notice the drapes and bulletin boards in both rooms.







■ The gals are wondering what to do on a Friday night. They stayed home and studied!



■ Notice of the tragic fire in Arkansas on March 5, 1959.

phone helped. If you were lucky, the person being sought might be on the same floor as the phone! It never occurred to anyone in those days that having a phone in your own room would ever be a possibility.

## Water Fights

If ever there was a signature non-sanctioned event in Residence, it had to be the water fight. For many years, one of the most severe grievances of the Administration and the Men's Residence House Committee was that fire-fighting equipment, namely the fire hoses, were tampered with in the conduct of water fights.

In 1959, the House Committee imposed a \$20 fine against anybody caught misusing the fire equipment, and an automatic fine of 25¢ was levied on all students, to be deducted from the existing pool of caution money if nobody was caught. The money from these fines was intended to be retained by the House Committee for the express purpose of obtaining suitable casings for the fire hoses.

As of 1959, neither the Administration nor the Men's Residence House Committee had been able to prevent the use of the fire hoses in water fights. Consequently, large amounts of water caused great harm to the structure of the Residence. Furthermore, constant misuse was bound to degrade the life-saving equipment, with the prospect that it would prove useless in the event of a fire. Each time after the hoses had been (mis)used, they were left hanging over the stairwell banisters to drain and dry. Nobody could know whether the hoses had been cut accidentally or otherwise rendered unserviceable.

Nor was the abuse of fire-fighting equipment opposed by the House Committee entirely on common-sense grounds; the members were all too aware of a horrendous tragedy that had just recently taken place in an industrial school dormitory in Little Rock, Arkansas, where 21 students lost their lives to a fire.

## Raids

And then of course there were the inevitable raids on the women's territory. Let us review the developments of the 1950 edition, which happened to transpire on—you guessed it—Hallowe'en. An advance coterie infiltrated the precincts via a basement floor window around 4:15 am in order to open the barricades.

The watchmen, in a move that itself must have been a transgression against the rules, turned a water hose on the banditos. This tactic was to no avail, and the marauding host, with faces covered below the eyes by handkerchiefs like outlaws, swarmed into the place in "bands" of ten to twenty using fire exits and the basement door.

They raced down the corridors, hammering on doors and shouting greetings to the girls who had not locked themselves in. They let loose a small flock of chickens on the main floor. The fowl were quickly captured and deposited in a stairway, and the troops had all left by 5:00 am. The official report makes no mention of water fights or absconded underwear. ■