

# ROOM TO RUMINATE

BY TIM BRADY



*Sixty-seven male faculty members of the University of Minnesota became the founding members of the Campus Club, located in Northrop House on Church Street.*



*In 1925, the Board of Regents voted to raze the Campus Club house. At the same time, an addition was made to Nicholson Hall, then home to the men's student union, and the Campus Club was given space there for the next 15 years.*



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Back in September 1911, a brief notice appeared in the Minnesota Alumni Weekly announcing the opening of a “campus club” at the University of Minnesota. Noting that faculty had been “agitating” for just such an organization on campus for several years, the Weekly reported that, through the course of the spring and summer, articles of incorporation for a club had been drafted and a home had been found. A campus fraternity house, known as Northrop House, on Church Street was leased from the Board of Regents and \$1,600 worth of furnishings and repair was collected to gussy it up. Renovations complete, the two-story house with its Tudor-frame design was deemed fit for faculty members to occupy, and on September 25 the doors opened for the first meeting of the Campus Club.

The establishment’s original bylaws were as basic as a meatloaf special. They stated that the organization’s general purpose should be “the advancement of the interests of the University of Minnesota; the social enjoyment of its members; [and] the acquirement, by purchase, lease or gift of such property, real and personal, as may be desirable for the furtherance of said interests.” Membership was limited to male faculty and a board of directors was formed to manage the club and collect fees.

A hundred years after its grand opening, the Campus Club remains a thriving For \$25,000, the Campus Club was given the top three floors of Coffman Memorial Union when it opened in 1940. Concern at the University of Minnesota. It has long since left that old frat house and is housed, as most of the University community knows, on the fourth floor of Coffman Memorial Union. It now accepts for membership both genders and anyone involved in the University community. The club has moved twice and undergone several renovations in its long history. It has also experienced a number of peaks and valleys in terms of membership and finances. Still, the club’s basic premise—advancing the interests of the University and bringing social enjoyment to its members—remains the essence of its being.

The University of Minnesota Campus Club was born in an era of expansion at the U. The intimate college of the 19th century was fast becoming history by the time of its creation, and the growing size of the campus—as well as the increased numbers of faculty, students, and educational departments—tended to isolate professors one from another. As at other universities across the country,

a group of faculty members decided that a gathering place where members could dine, share thoughts and opinions, and simply meet for a game of cards or billiards was in order, and so the Campus Club was born.

Sixty-seven faculty members became charter patrons of the club and congregated at the house on Church Street. The place had seven bedrooms, which were all soon occupied by visiting faculty or bachelor professors. Clanging radiators, passing trains, and the chatter of members drifting in and out of the parlor made the house less a place of thoughtful deliberation than a guys' club.

Still, rules in place at the time prohibited drinking alcohol on campus, and talk of a ban on smoking as well prompted some faculty members to organize a pair of dining clubs as an outlet for more raucous entertainment. One of these was known as the Aristocrats; the other was dubbed the Bourgeoisie (their names, down through the years, would be shortened to the "A" club and the "B" club). They held their revelries off campus, usually at colorful establishments in downtown Minneapolis like McCormick's, which was attached to the old Nicollet Hotel. On the night of the Aristocrats' first gathering there, Oscar Firkins, chair of the English Department, was so appalled when one of the McCormick's club dancers tried to kiss him on top of the head that he handed the club secretary a silver dollar, turned on his heel, and marched out of the establishment. Other faculty members were less inclined to blush.

Evenings at the Campus Club itself were more sedate. Unfortunately, competition from faculty associations, along with the advent of World War I, put a crimp in club membership—and a \$1,000 tax assessed on the establishment during the war almost sunk the Campus Club before it could sail. Members found a benefactor in one of the club's founders, however. Professor Frederic Butters, who served on the botany faculty from 1901 until his death in 1945, made a loan to keep the organization afloat.

He took his payback in meals—three years' worth, according to a brief history of the club that Butters himself authored in 1940.

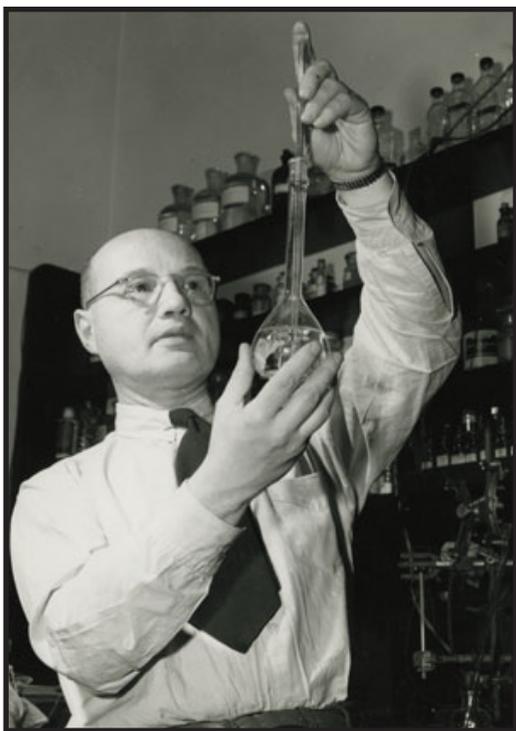
The original Campus Club sat on prime University real estate, just south of the administration building, and in 1925 the regents voted to raze the house for campus expansion. Faced with eviction, Campus Club members began a campaign to raise money for a new building and printed a brochure with the alluring title "Shall Professors Foregather?" An offer from the Board of Regents, however, obviated the need for a separate structure. An addition on the east side



*Frederic Butters, a professor of botany at the University, made a loan to the Campus Club to keep it solvent during World War I. He was repaid in meals. He is pictured here in 1938 on Prospect Mountain in Estes Park, Colorado.*



*Members and guests moved through the Campus Club cafeteria line on the fourth floor of Coffman Union in 1970.*



*Izaak Kolthoff, professor of analytical chemistry at the University (pictured in 1950), lived in a room at the Campus Club in Nicholson Hall beginning in 1927, when he arrived at the U, and in Coffman Union into the 1960s, when the apartments were converted into meeting rooms.*



*Dale Shephard, a wrestling and boxing champion at the University, was manager of the Campus Club from 1936 until his death in 1972. He is pictured here in 1949.*

of Nicholson Hall, which was then serving as the men's student union, was offered to the Campus Club. The only hitch was that the club would have to move in 10 years, when an anticipated increase in student enrollment would require a larger student union.

Anticipating this eventuality, the club's Board of Directors levied an assessment on members, set aside a portion of dues, and marked up fees on meals. Within a decade, the club raised \$30,000. The move out of Nicholson was postponed five more years, however, until 1940.

In the meantime, members settled—or squeezed—into their quarters in Nicholson. Aside from the lack of space, the new facility had “a complete and perfect lack of ventilation,” according to a chronicler in the campus newsletter *Minnesota Chats*. “Goodness knows what the people who planned the old Minnesota Union thought it was that humans breathed,” the scribe reported, “certainly not air.” The old proscriptions against smoking were long gone. Consequently, “You could bump your head upon the air in the [billiard] room. Most tragic of all, if anyone ventured to open a window, in winter that is, some sharp-eyed influenza addict would spot the very thought aborning and slam the sash down almost before the first pure inward draft had swung the blue tobacco smoke of the interior into a long, concave curl. Fresh air was doomed to remain outside, where, presumably, it would remain fresh.”

There were also complaints about the cuisine. At the first Campus Club, the organization ran its own kitchen; at Nicholson Hall, for economic reasons, members took their food from the student union cafeteria. Butters labeled the new eating arrangement “gastronomically sad.”

By contrast, the new digs at Coffman Memorial Union, when opened in 1940, seemed positively sumptuous. Constructed for about \$2 million, with 45 percent of the cost coming from a federal grant provided by the Work Projects Administration and matching funds raised through donations and student fees, the new student union was built with the understanding that the top three floors would

belong to the Campus Club—provided the club delivered \$25,000 to the Board of Regents. It did, and the Campus Club soon moved into what *The Minnesota Daily* called “a castle in the air.”

While membership in the Campus Club was reserved for men, the University, at the prodding of the Women's Faculty Club, required that a portion of the space at Coffman be open to women. As a result, the dining room on the fourth floor allowed both sexes, though their tables were separated by a row of planter boxes. A lounge on that same floor was likewise segregated. The men's side, outfitted in blue art deco furniture, was separated from the women's lounge, which was oatmeal-colored.

Women were banned from the rosewood-paneled fifth floor, except for his-and-her “quiet rooms” for reading and study. The rest of the floor included bridge and billiards rooms and a men’s library, overlooking the river and decorated in deep maroon with a Chinese motif.

The sixth floor was given over to apartments for 13 members of the club. Among these was Professor Izaak Kolthoff, who also had a room in Nicholson Hall. In fact, Kolthoff’s stay in Campus Club housing would stretch from his arrival at the U in 1927 all the way into the 1960s, when the Coffman apartments were converted into meeting rooms (Kolthoff continued to live in University housing until his death at the age of 99 in 1993).

A lifelong bachelor, Kolthoff was one of the most highly esteemed and honored analytical chemists in the world. During World War II, he headed a research team that devised a way to produce synthetic rubber at a time when rubber shortages were seriously hampering the war effort. A revered teacher and unforgettable character, Kolthoff was a fixture at the Campus Club even after his apartment was converted to meeting space. He kept an office in the fifth-floor library, which aside from being littered with his papers was said always to be well stocked with candy bars and butter rum Lifesavers.

Dale Shephard was another Campus Club institution. A former University wrestling and boxing champion, Shephard was hired to manage the club in 1936, when it was still located at Nicholson. Affectionately called “Shep” by members, he stayed in that position, overseeing dining services, bookkeeping, room rentals, and special events, until his death in 1972. A meeting room on the club’s west side now bears his name.

Club membership swelled in the postwar years, as did student enrollment, creating demand on limited space in the union. In 1956, the Campus Club expanded its dining facilities by adding rooms on top of the east and west wings and remodeled the terrace to allow more dining space. But pressure was building for the Campus Club to share its floors and be more inclusive of women and non-faculty staff. Along with eliminating the apartments from the sixth floor in the mid-1960s, the Club leased the fifth floor card room to the Women’s Faculty Club and, in January 1970, gave up its dining room to the first-ever women’s-only party at the Campus Club.

The University was changing in many ways by the early 1970s, and the Campus Club began to change with it—not necessarily for the better. Membership at the club was aging while the faculty was expanding and getting younger. The University itself was growing once again and stretching across the Mississippi, which affected the collegiality of the Campus Club. In a 1995 interview with U of M historian Ann Pflaum (Ph.D. ’75), longtime geography professor Eugene Cotton Mather recalled how, when he first arrived on campus in the late 1950s, everyone from his department “went over [to the Campus Club] every day. We mixed with people from all departments. It was one of the beautiful things about the University of Minnesota.” When the department moved across the river to the West Bank, he and his colleagues quit making the trek.



*The rosewood-paneled fireplace lounge on Coffman Union’s fifth floor was for men only.*



*A lounge for women faculty was separate from a men’s lounge, both on the fourth floor of Coffman Memorial Union.*

The facility began to show its age. The carpet was frayed. A widely reported health inspection turned up mouse droppings in the kitchen. Membership dropped, and a subsequent lack of revenue prompted what many considered a certain stinginess in the club. One rumor had it that a lock was placed on the kitchen freezer to prevent Professor Kolthoff from pilfering the occasional late night scoop of ice cream.

A restoration was in order, and it came, beginning in November 1999, when the Campus Club shut down for an extensive remodeling of the entire student union. (The Alumni Association, which had rented space from the Campus Club on the fifth floor for seven years, moved to the McNamara Alumni Center at the same time.) The club reopened in January 2003 in a completely renovated space, including a new room, the Bar, on the south side of the building facing the Mississippi River. A large dining room on the west side of the club features a spectacular view of the Minneapolis skyline. And the expanded terrace not only provides outdoor seating and a stunning view of Northrop Mall, it has restored some of the art deco beauty of Coffman Union.

Today, the Campus Club has more than 1,500 members, and membership is open to staff, students, regents, alumni, parents, and donors, in addition to faculty. An emphasis on special events and party facilities has provided new streams of revenue, the large tables in the dining room once again facilitate inter- and intra-departmental chitchat, and the popular bar holds one of the most unique liquor licenses in the state. A statute written especially for it sits near the cash register; it helps explain how the property can hold one of the rare liquor licenses to be granted on University property: "No license to sell intoxicating liquor may be issued at any place on the East Side of the Mississippi River within one tenth of a mile of the main building of the University of Minnesota unless the establishment is on the property owned and operated by a nonprofit corporation organized prior to 1940."

Cocktail hours and beer-, wine-, and food-tasting gatherings have been popular events in the restored Campus Club. One of planks in the original list of bylaws—the social enjoyment of members—is easy to see at work here. Members must still travel across the river to the heart of the wicked city, however, if they hope to collect kisses from local dancers.

*Tim Brady is a St. Paul-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Minnesota. A number of events celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Campus Club are planned throughout 2011, including a Centennial Tea & Historical Fashion Show with the University Women's Club March 15.*

*Go to [www.campusclubumn.org](http://www.campusclubumn.org) for more information*

*\*Originally published in the Minnesota Magazine of the University of Minnesota Alumni Association spring issue 2011*



*Newlyweds Don and Allie (B.S. '42) Skoro enjoy the Campus Club terrace in 1949. Photo courtesy of Marty Skoro*