

## Old News

**The Omaha Press Club was founded in fun 50 years ago.**

By Judy Horan

The Omaha Press Club founded in 1955 was Omaha's first official press club. But it was not the first effort at a press club in Omaha.

“A flourishing Press Club was in existence as early as 1888” and maybe earlier, reported author James Clemon in the book ‘The Omaha Press Club: A Portrait.’ That club opened to an overflow crowd on Jan. 17, 1888, in the Continental Building at 209 S. 19<sup>th</sup> St.

In 1904, Omaha newspapermen took rooms in a building at 15<sup>th</sup> and Harney Streets. They wanted a place to shoot pool and play cards. The club's launching was financed by a theatrical production, “Toodles and Poster Land,” featuring club members, under the direction of a professional Chicago director. Obviously early press club members were fun-loving.

An Omaha Press Club also was listed as a seventh-floor tenant of the Bee Building, which sat at 17<sup>th</sup> and Farnam Streets from 1889 to 1910.

For a number of years, there was no club.

Suddenly in 1919, newsmen again became interested in forming a press club. And for a good reason. It was the start of Prohibition, and they needed a place to keep their moonshine.

“After January 16, 1919, establishments calling themselves press clubs rose and fell in Omaha in proportion to the habitués’ need for places to sample wet goods out of sight of the law,” Clemon wrote.

One such place was rumored to be a basement room in the Morris Apartments at 18<sup>th</sup> and Dodge Streets that opened shortly after Prohibition. Walls of small lockers --- each big enough to hold one bottle of illegal alcohol --- lined the club, according to newsman Ned Williams, who began his career in 1914 at the Omaha Daily News.

“Each member had a key to his own locker,” said Williams who went on to become a press agent for such stars as Jean Harlow and Cab Calloway.

Hugh Fogarty, the legendary managing editor of the World-Herald, recalled several so-called press clubs that he labeled “badly managed, dismal failures.”

“The only place I ever visited that professed to be a press club was in the old, rickety Barker Building ---the one that burned --- on the southwest corner of Fifteenth and Farnam. There was a ratty one-room setup presided over by a guy named Shorty, a retired printer...when I patronized the place in 1929.”

Fogarty speculated that the so-called press club may have been just a bootlegging operation for Shorty. (The old Barker Building burned in 1928 and was replaced in 1929 by a new building that still stands there today, so Fogarty may have miscalculated by a few years).

In Omaha in the 1880s, there were five daily newspapers: the Evening Omaha Bee, Morning Omaha Bee, Omaha Daily

Republican, Omaha Daily Herald and Omaha Daily World. Five weeklies included German, Bohemian and Danish newspapers.

After Sept. 28, 1937, the only daily newspaper to survive was the Omaha World-Herald. As the number of newspapers declined, so did attempts to establish a press club.

But the advent of broadcasting meant the growth of reporting staff in the city. By 1955, there were two TV stations in Omaha --- WOW-TV and KMTV --- and radio stations had been around for 33 years. Many people living in 1955 could remember when the first radio station went on the air in 1923; the station, WOAW, later became WOW.

Stations weren't ready for women reporters. Dottie Sater, Omaha's first full-time broadcast news reporter, remembers that her title was secretary at WOW Radio-TV when she worked in the newsroom from 1952 to 1959. The first woman Omaha TV reporter given that title was Ann Pedersen in 1974 at WOW-TV.

Cable TV did not exist in 1955. TV newscasts were only 15 minutes long. There were no live reports. No weather radar. And, for at least another 20 years, no women newscasters. But there were more reporters. And more interest in forming a press club.

### **1955 --- Birth of the Omaha Press Club**

The year is 1955. Dwight D. Eisenhower is president. Omaha Mayor Johnny Rosenblatt is in the bleachers for the College World Series. Nine years later, the stadium would be named for him.

Cattle trucks back up traffic on L Street in South Omaha, then center of the world's largest livestock market. People are watching "The Today Show" and "Meet the Press" on TV, as they still do 50 years later (but now in color).

Another significant moment in 1955 — a handful of people in the news business kick off the Omaha Press Club. The club that had been around in various forms since the 19<sup>th</sup> century was resuscitated and becomes legal with the first constitution and by-laws. Dues are set at \$5 a year plus a \$5 initiation fee. Those who struggled with the high dues could pay in monthly installments.

Wayne Bradley, the club's first president, remembers: "In 1955 a few of us thought we might start a chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, but we lacked members and money, so we started a Press Club."

Bradley pushed for the club's start, backed by John Savage of the Omaha World-Herald. Steve Murphy and Jim McGaffin of WOW Radio-TV were among the early founders. Sater, who became president in 1959, wrote the club's first newsletter.

Members established as their new club's mission: "To promote excellence in communications and media professions through fellowship, education and advocacy of freedom of information."

## **OPC's Fun Side**

Although dedicated to good works early on, members could not let go of a long tradition of fun. In 1957, Omaha Press Club members launched the annual Press Club Show --- a satirical look at the year's news.

But the show that the Omaha Press Club began 48 years ago was not the first of its kind for Omaha. Journalists had

been putting on shows as early as 1938 when World-Herald workers and others presented a dinner and show to benefit the newspaper's Free Milk and Shoe Fund (a forerunner to the newspaper's Goodfellows charity of today).

Just like today, prominent citizens like Mayor Dan Butler, State Sen. "Terrible Terry" Carpenter and businessman Otto Swanson were targets of songs and skits at the Paxton Hotel, then at 14<sup>th</sup> and Farnam Streets. The 1940 show "The Groups of Wrath" reflected the Depression era. But World War II ended the shows that ran 1938-1940. They began again in 1957, when admittance was \$2.50 per person.

Among those involved was Pat Hall, then president of the Nebraska Press Photographers Association. He arranged the crowning of the 1957 Miss Nebraska Press Photographer at the show.

The show almost began as a men-only event. A group gathered in John Savage's backyard --- a favorite meeting place for members --- talked about starting a gridiron show that would be a stag. But Sater put her foot down and said "no."

So it began as a dinner-dance at the Birchwood Club at Redick Avenue and Minne Lusa Boulevard.

Bill Drake, who was bureau manager for United Press, wrote a satirical review of the year, with help from others. He then turned to TV news photographer Dave Hamer for help.

"He came to me and said could we put pictures with this," remembers Hamer. "We used national news clips and local stories and made it funny. The Omaha City Council was disputing an issue, and we put in file pictures of people shooting guns at each other."

That first year's audience was small, with about 50 people, and the film was only 20 minutes long. World-Herald columnist Bob McMorris began writing the script the second year. He was later joined by Jim Clemon.

At first members made fun of themselves. By the early 1960s, they turned their wit on to political figures and other local news of the year.

But 1963 marked the end of the filmed parody because of a tragedy. The Press Club Ball had been scheduled for Nov. 23. Tickets were sold, the film was ready and the menu arranged at the Fontenelle Hotel ballroom.

By a terrible irony, it was the night after President John F. Kennedy was shot. In mourning, the Omaha Press Club postponed the festivities until mid-February of the next year. By then the news film was outdated.

“The film was done for 1963. By the time we got around to rescheduling in 1964, we realized things happened that should be in it and there were things no longer relevant,” Hamer said.

Clemon, a writer for the show that year, remembers hastily writing a few songs to go with the film. “I think we wrote them that morning for that night.”

The audience loved the live performance. Every year since then, the show has been live with song parodies, dancing and jokes by the evening’s emcee. Members who can’t sing or dance end up on stage doing both. Important dignitaries grin and bear it as the journalists turn their writing talents to spoofing and skewering people in the news.

The OPC show now takes months of work by 120 people, including writers, a cast, backstage crew and full orchestra. In 1983, Cox Cable began recording and telecasting the performances.

Guest stars make the show a popular ticket in town. Omaha investor Warren Buffett likes to play his ukulele and write his own lines for guest appearances.

In 1988 when ConAgra’s CEO Mike Harper was making efforts to establish a corporate campus on the riverfront with

the help of state tax credits, the show was titled “Harper’s Bizarre: Nebraska Gets the Business.” Harper showed he was a good sport by making a surprise appearance in uniform as World War II military leader Gen. George Patton.

The Omaha Press Club Show was the last public appearance for U.S. Sen. Ed Zorinsky. The popular Nebraska politician suffered a fatal heart attack after performing a parody of “The Great Pretender” in the 1987 OPC Show at Peony Park. Cast members found themselves somberly covering the story of his death after performing with him on stage.

The board of directors had to face a tough decision. Should they continue the show the second night? Mrs. Zorinsky encouraged them to do so.

Over the years, Press Club members have found other ways to have fun. Past-president Bill Ramsey remembers Military Night with tanks and C-rations, OPC European tours for members, sponsorships of Ak-Sar-Ben races, golf days, theme parties such as a fashion night and a W.C. Fields Festival. And, of course, a frog-jumping contest.

## **Education, Scholarships and Awards**

The Press Club launched educational programs to support its mission statement.

In 1957, the OPC started a scholarship program with a \$50 grant. Today, the Omaha Press Foundation provides up to \$25,000 in scholarships and grants each year to students at Creighton University and the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Lincoln. Lincoln students were added in 1977.

A dinner for the recipients and their families is held with speakers that have included NBC anchor, now retired, Tom Brokaw, and retired ABC-TV anchor Steve Bell. Both started their journalism careers in Omaha. Brokaw started at

KMTV and Bell at WOWT.

The Press Club has awarded scholarships to hundreds journalism students. Two scholarship winners, Henry Cordes in 1984 and Howard Marcus in 1982, went on to become Omaha Press Club presidents. A 1973 recipient, Larry King, became an executive editor for the Omaha World-Herald. In 2005, OPC Journalism Education Inc. took steps to formally change its name to Omaha Press Club Foundation.

Career achievement awards were established in 2003. The first was presented posthumously to Steve Murphy, long-time news director for WOWT. The 2004 recipient was writer and college professor Bob Reilly, who died shortly before the award was presented. Mary McGrath, one of the World-Herald's first woman reporters, was honored. She was a reporter from 1957 until her 2000 retirement.

Educational forums and professional development seminars were added and continue today. CNN Headline News anchor Chuck Roberts presented a professional development seminar in 2005.

Topics are sometimes controversial, such as Forums on obscenity in society, expanded gambling in Nebraska and the "one city, one school district" issue.

The Forums also are scenes for lively political debates, such as those held with mayoral and senatorial candidates

In 2004, the Omaha Press Club Excellence in Journalism competition was launched to recognize and promote outstanding work. Awards are given in five categories. In 2008, the OPC began inducting journalism pioneers into the Journalists of Excellence Hall of Fame.

**Best View In Town**



How the Press Club ended up on top of the First National Center is a story that goes back more than three decades. In 1971, the club was becoming a force in the city and looking for a permanent meeting spot.

For years, members had met in breweries and bars. The 1958 president, Rocky Rockwell, remembers meeting in a small room in the Rome Hotel and later above the Office Bar on South 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Members later shared space at the Fontenelle Hotel with the Aero Club.

The late Frank Scott, then general manager of KLNG Radio, who later joined Voice of America stationed in Munich, told Clemon he and others talked to hotels and saloon owners about rooms. “But we just didn’t have any capital or credit. We were diligently pursuing a possible liaison with the Hilton Hotel. Then Howard Silber came to me with the word that he mentioned our desire for facilities to...John Lauritzen at the First National Bank.”

In 1971, First National was erecting a 22-story building at 16<sup>th</sup> and Dodge Streets on the site of the old post office. Club members met with the bank president, John Davis, and other First National people to discuss establishing a restaurant on top of his new building.

Davis said that a Press Club restaurant could not succeed with media members only. However, if the Omaha Press Club would obtain 1,000 associate members at dues of \$125 each year, the bank would give the club a loan to start a restaurant. The theory was that people would flock to spend money at a club where they could rub elbows with such media celebrities as World-Herald columnist Bob McMorris.

The club, led by businessman John Godfrey, came up with the 1,000 names within 90 days. Many were signed up at the Press Club Ball in February 1971. The Omaha Press Club presented the pledges, and Davis honored First National’s commitment to come up with the loan. Non-press members were then welcome to join the Press Club.

Helping the club develop its restaurant was former Mayor A.V. Sorensen, a respected public figure and advisor to OPC. One person who worked tirelessly to get the club going was John Savage, an award-winning World-Herald photographer who earned the title “founder of the Omaha Press Club.”

Savage retired from the World-Herald and became a member of the Nebraska unicameral from 1971 to 1979. He also was the club’s first full-time executive director. Savage had been one of the club’s first presidents in 1956 and 1957. Scott, who had worked so hard to get the restaurant open, also served for a few years as the executive director.

Members lined up to dine at the elegant restaurant after it opened on Nov. 17, 1971, when Gov. J.J. Exon and Mayor Gene Leahy helped dedicate the new club. Terry Forsberg, president in 1972, remembers making a profit the first year of the restaurant.

The restaurant on the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor can still claim “the best view in town,” even though the view has changed considerably since 1971. Members look out at an expanded Creighton University, the new Qwest Center Omaha, Union Pacific’s new headquarters and --- most noticeable --- First National’s big sister building on the south, the new 40-story First National Tower.

A spirited discussion took place in 1985, remembers then-President Steve Jordon. Plans were being made to move the circular bar into the Agnew Room. Jordon broke the board of directors tie vote and voted to keep the bar as it was.

In 1993, members began another heated debate, this time about closing the restaurant or moving it elsewhere. Shouting matches and newsletter editorials divided members. Companies at that time were moving out of downtown Omaha and club usage was down.

Public relations executive and the 1974 OPC president, Bill Ramsey, led a marketing effort to keep the club and its

panoramic view in the First National Center. A decision was made to wait and see if things improved.

In a few years, the downtown renaissance began with people moving to and companies developing in the downtown area. Timing of the downtown revival was perfect. The Omaha Press Club's decision to stay in downtown Omaha was vindicated as restaurant business improved.

### **Face on the Barroom Floor**

Along with the 1971 opening of the club, the OPC introduced "The Face on the Barroom Floor," a satirical tribute to newsmakers.

The Face on the Barroom Floor is a caricature drawing of a newsmaker that actually is placed on the club's barroom floor. When the next "Face" is unveiled, the previous Face is moved to a more dignified spot on the club's walls. The newsmaker's Face is unveiled during a roast and toast by the honoree's friends and colleagues. At the club's restaurant are wall after wall of the hanging caricatures.

The force behind the idea was then-World-Herald columnist Bob McMorris, who died in July 2005. The idea was based on a poem about a painting on a barroom floor in Central City, Colo. Bob turned to a World-Herald colleague, artist Jim Horan, to create the caricatures. Horan was the creator of the World-Herald's "Harry Husker," a cartoon character who predicted Nebraska football scores.

"I guess Bob thought if I had enough courage to predict Nebraska football scores, I could lampoon newsmakers and politicians without fear," laughs Horan, who once received hate mail when he predicted a loss for Nebraska. Now retired from the World-Herald, he has created all but two of the Faces since they began in 1971.

The first Face on the Barroom Floor was Omaha Mayor Gene Leahy, a fun-loving politician who dressed up in admiral's hats and bunny suits for speeches and parades.

“He was the perfect subject to set the tone for the humorous and satirical approach we took for the Face events,” Horan says. “And we knew he'd go along with the joke.”

The second Face subject was Nebraska football coach Bob Devaney, who was celebrating his team's second national championship.

A memorable early Face was Vice President Spiro Agnew. The Press Club asked noted syndicated cartoonist Oliphant to produce a large drawing of the veep to also show that day. But Agnew's security people asked to have it taken away, fearing it would offend him.

But when the vice president heard about it, he asked to see it, remembers Ramsey. Agnew signed the drawing and then added in the area where his arm was drawn: “Walter Cronkite better beware the power of this bicep.”

Horan remembers that the veep's security detail would not allow Agnew to bend over to unveil the Face, saying, “The Vice President of the United States does not bend over.”

Agnew dedicated a private room at the club that was named tongue in cheek by members for the vice president, whose disdain for the press was well known. It is still used for private events and is available without charge for news conferences.

The first Face presentations were simple. The subject was invited to lunch and Press Club officers said, “Here it is.” Today, the Face on the Barroom Floor is unveiled during a roast and toast that is followed by a dinner at the club.

The honoree invites his or her friends to be roasters. Philanthropist Walter Scott, for example, invited as his roasters investor Warren Buffett, who was a Face in 1985; U.S. Congressman Tom Osborne, who was a Face in 1979 when he was Nebraska's head football coach, and businessmen David Sokol and Mickey Skinner.

In March 2005, the Press Club observed a historic event by unveiling the 100<sup>th</sup> Face on the Barroom Floor. The special honoree was Omaha World-Herald Publisher John Gottschalk, who drew a record crowd to watch his Face unveiled. His roasters included Sen. Chuck Hagel, who had been a Face in 2003.

“Those reporters who began the Omaha Press Club in fun had no idea what it could become 50 years later,” said past president Anne Walsh of Union Pacific Railroad. “Today we have a restaurant, scholarships and educational workshops. But we still have fun.”