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This Week in KU History

August 14

1950 Jocks' Niche

For more than five decades now, the three-story Pennsylvania Dutch-style home at 1043 Indiana Street has offered stalwart, if largely unsung, service to the University of Kansas. At one time or another, it has provided headquarters for everything from the Center for Biomedical Research and the Child Research Lab to KU's campus-wide recycling program and even office space for the Asbestos Removal Team.

In its original KU incarnation, however, this former private residence was one of dozens of Mount Oread-area structures pressed into emergency student housing duty in the aftermath of World War II. Purchased by the University on August 14, 1950, it was intended to help address the shortage of residential options at KU sparked by the massive influx of military veterans attending college on the GI Bill.

Yet while some of 1043 Indiana's inhabitants had previously worn their country's uniform on foreign battlefields, the home itself became distinctive – and also earned its enduring moniker of “Varsity House” – thanks to those who wore the crimson and blue. Indeed, for the first six years of its nine-year run as a male student dormitory, this residence was home to first-string players on the KU football Jayhawkers (as the team was then known) – heroes and veterans of the intercollegiate gridiron wars.

While hardly a haven of studiousness during the years the jocks were in residence, Varsity House was not quite “Animal House” either – the ever-vigilant housemother saw to that. Instead, this residence hall fostered, perhaps even embodied, a strong sense of team unity for those living under its roof, a group that included two future professional football players: one a guard for the San Francisco 49ers, the other a Pro Bowl and NFL champion linebacker for the Cleveland Browns.

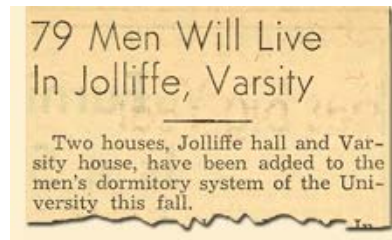
Non-residents, too, were also apparently appreciative of the rich student-athlete camaraderie to be found at 1043 Indiana Street. In fact, no less towering a sports figure than KU basketball star, later NBA superstar, Wilt Chamberlain was reportedly a “frequent visitor” to Varsity House during his mid-1950s days on

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Jock Chalk, Jayhawk. In 1950, the Pennsylvania Dutch-style residence at 1043 Indiana Street, known as “Varsity House,” began service as a men’s student dormitory. Located just northeast of Memorial Stadium, its name derived from the fact that, for the first six years of its nine-year run as a University residence hall, the home was primarily occupied by starting members of the KU football Jayhawkers, as the team was then known. Varsity House ceased being a student housing facility in 1959. It remains a University property to this day, providing quarters for Custodial Services and the Department of Environmental Stewardship, manager of KU’s campus-wide recycling program.
Image: University Archives



Varsity House Takes The Field. Purchased for \$18,000, Varsity House was ready to receive its inaugural crop of 30 male students – all KU football players – in time for fall 1950 semester classes. What greeted them was a three-story structure that offered a well-stocked basement

Mount Oread.

Looking back, onetime KU footballer Ray Bower spoke for many of the hall's residents when he recalled how "Varsity House was home away from home where varsity athletes could just hang out and be themselves. I am so thankful," he added some 50 years hence, "for my opportunity to attend KU and live at the Varsity House with [all] those great guys."

As is the case with many of the makeshift living arrangements at KU during the early postwar period, the archival record for Varsity House is rather spotty. In its day, noted Fred McElhenie of the KU Department of Student Housing, "Campus and local newspapers paid little attention" to this "battered veteran [which] still holds the line at 11th and Indiana." That said, at least some of Varsity House's 1950s-era history can be reconstructed from the smattering of surviving documentary materials, as well as from a patchwork of the still-vivid reminiscences of its former residents.

Based on its architectural design, it is very likely that the structure now standing at 1043 Indiana Street – located just northeast of Memorial Stadium – was built as a private home during the first decade of the twentieth century. By the early-1920s, it had been taken over by the Delta Tau Delta fraternity. And in 1927, 1043 Indiana switched genders when the women of Delta Zeta purchased it for their sorority house, a role it performed for the next 17 years. Then, in 1944, William and Aura Kornhaus bought the residence and 1043 Indiana reverted to its ostensibly original function as a single-family house.

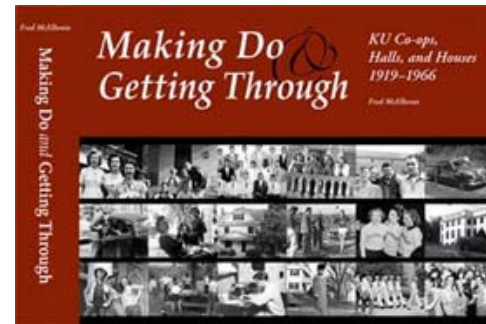
But for whatever reason, the Kornhaus family ended up living at 1043 Indiana only six years. On August 14, 1950, they sold their home to the housing-strapped University of Kansas for \$18,000.

Upon taking possession, KU immediately began converting the home into a male student dormitory, intending that it be ready in time for fall semester classes, which were scheduled to start approximately one month later. As reported in the September 18, 1950, edition of the University Daily Kansan – in an article that first refers to the new property as "Varsity House" – the renovations were, in the end, finished on time and, accordingly, the "large frame building" was prepared to receive its full complement of 30 men.

What greeted the inaugural occupants

cafeteria; a large, second-floor communal sleeping porch filled with double-decker bunk beds, as was the norm in those days; a goodly number of study and storage rooms; and a single second-floor bathroom that had to be shared by everyone. On the first floor were the community living and study areas, as well as the housemother's quarters that included a bedroom and private bathroom.

Image: University Daily Kansan



Buy The Book. If you're enjoying this article about KU student housing history, you'll want to read *Making Do & Getting Through*, a new book containing hundreds of reminiscences about the KU residence life experience from the 1930s through the 1960s. Compiled by Fred McElhenie, former associate director of the KU Department of Student Housing, *Making Do & Getting Through* is a major contribution to the social history of the University of Kansas. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of each copy of the book will benefit the Fred McElhenie Scholarship Fund that recognizes KU students who are active in community involvement, and the Historic Mount Oread Fund.

[Order this book online.](#)

Image: Historic Mount Oread Fund

"The Varsity House concept," observed hall resident and Jayhawker team member Hal Cleavinger, "was obviously good for team togetherness." As he saw it, the "real reason was to promote team unity [and] I believe it did that."

With its full-service cafeteria – run by several specially hired cooks – Varsity House was intended to satisfy the voracious appetites of KU football players, whose coaches, moreover, were determined that they eat right and also gain weight. In fact, this culinary component was greatly appreciated by the athletes themselves. Some of their fondest memories were of the hall's "first class food operation."

was a three-story structure that offered an extensive, well-stocked basement cafeteria; a large, second-floor communal sleeping porch filled with double-decker bunk beds, as was the norm in those days; a goodly number of study and storage rooms; and a single second-floor bathroom that had to be shared by everyone. On the first floor were the community living and study areas, as well as the housemother's quarters that included a bedroom and private bathroom.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, at the outset, Varsity House was the exclusive preserve of KU football players. "I moved to the Varsity House when it opened in 1950," wrote former resident and Jayhawker team member Aubrey Linville. "Many of us moved in from fraternity houses. Only football players lived in the house then."

At first, class rank or starting status does not seem to have been a determining factor in gaining a berth at Varsity House. By the fall of 1952, however, "the edict went out" – presumably at the behest of Head Coach J.V. Sikes – "that the 22 'starters' on the football team were to live in Varsity House, plus others who wished to live there until it was fully occupied," according to the memory of hall resident Hal Cleavinger.

Some, apparently, were a bit put out by the order and moved into Varsity House only "under duress." But as Ray Bower wrote, every "varsity football scholarship player" eventually fell in line and most began warming to his new accommodations. "The Varsity House concept," observed Cleavinger, "was obviously good for team togetherness." As he saw it, the "real reason was to promote team unity [and] I believe it did that."

This consolidating arrangement made a good deal of sense on at least two counts. First, the Jayhawkers previously had been scattered all about town, either in frat houses, random single rooms, or the cramped quarters located beneath Memorial Stadium, yet another emergency housing solution devised during World War II that was then known as McCook Hall.

Second, with its full-service cafeteria – run by several specially hired cooks – Varsity House was evidently intended to satisfy the voracious appetites of KU football players, whose coaches, moreover, were determined that they eat right and also gain weight.

Hopkins Hall (22)	1.06
University Residence Halls (Men)	
Jolliffe Hall (50)	1.91
Sterling-Oliver Hall (52)	1.86
Battenfeld Hall (51)	1.85
Stephenson Hall (50)	1.67
All-University Average	1.53
All-Men's Average	1.47
Oread Hall (173)	1.34
McCook Hall (38)	1.00
Varsity House (34)	0.91
Other Organized Houses	
Graduate Club (7)	0.85

Low Scorers. While not quite "Animal House," Varsity House was not exactly a haven of studiousness either. Over the course of 1951-52, for example, the 34 men of Varsity House registered the lowest GPA on campus, earning a collective 0.91 on a 3.0 scale (roughly a 1.2 on today's more familiar 4.0 scale). In other words, the jocks scored a collective "D" average that year. "One thing [Varsity House] did not promote was scholarship," recalled Hal Cleavinger. "The environment was terrible for any form of study." Former resident Harry Solter agreed. "It's a wonder," he said, "that we all didn't flunk out of school."

Image: University Daily Kansan



Neighborly Nemesis. According to some former Varsity House residents, their "biggest nemesis" was the Phi Psi fraternity house (above) situated diagonally across Indiana Street. The Phi Psi members "would [always] be out getting crazy with their pledges or coming in from partying on Friday nights," recalled Harry Solter. "Many of us [in Varsity House] had athletic events on Saturday or would be just trying to sleep through all their noise. I don't remember any physical altercations," he added, "but there were plenty of verbal insults thrown back and forth. We would yell at them to stop beating their pledges and they would call us 'dumb jocks.'"

Image: University Archives

Had their conflicts with the Phi Psi fraternity brothers ever devolved to fisticuffs, however, the smart money would surely have been on the men of Varsity House. For despite the Jayhawkers' failure to win any Big Eight Conference titles during the 1950s, KU did field some very solid football squads

The culinary component of Varsity House seems to have been greatly appreciated by the athletes themselves, given that some of their fondest memories were of the hall's "first class food operation." The staff, remembered Bower, "knew everyone by name and made a point to cook just like your mom did, or so we thought." (Most second-string KU football players, incidentally, remained in McCook Hall at this time. They did, however, make the three-block trek three times a day to take their meals in Varsity House's enviable cafeteria.)

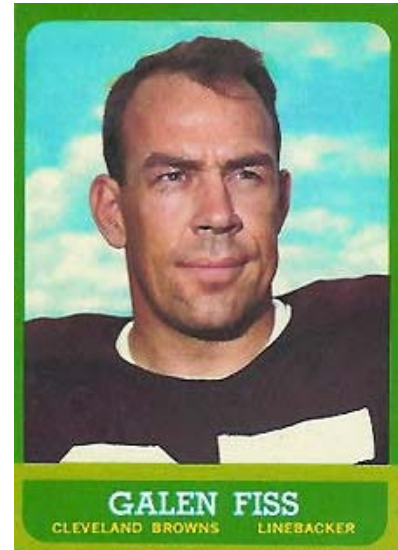
Another benefit that almost surely entered the coaches' minds was the constant supervision the men would receive from the Varsity housemother, Mrs. Ruth Jeter, a woman for whom the former student-athletes still retained great affection even after more than 50 years. "She was a wonderful lady," Bower recalled, "and how she put up with all that went on in the Varsity House makes her a Saint." Speaking of which, he added, one of Mrs. Jeter's steadfast weekly requests was that "someone take her to church" every Sunday morning. "She didn't care which church you went to, she would go." Others remembered her as something of a cardsharp, effortlessly schooling the young men in games such as bridge.

In terms of their actual coursework, though, it doesn't appear as if Mrs. Jeter, or anyone else for that matter, was able to be much in the way of a positive influence. "Most certainly," recalled Cleavinger – who, in addition to being a starting Jayhawker halfback, was also engaged in the rigorous study of law – "one thing the house did not promote was scholarship. The environment was terrible for any form of study. You could hear discussions easily throughout the house at just above conversation level." In his concluding opinion, "The result was a scholastic disaster."

Ultimately, it seems escape from Varsity House was the only viable option for those few who desired at least a modicum of peace and quiet. Cleavinger, for one, received a special dispensation that permitted him to move out of the residence hall after only one semester. What that did, he noted, "was make me eligible for – and I did receive – 'most improved student' over the balance of my law degree."

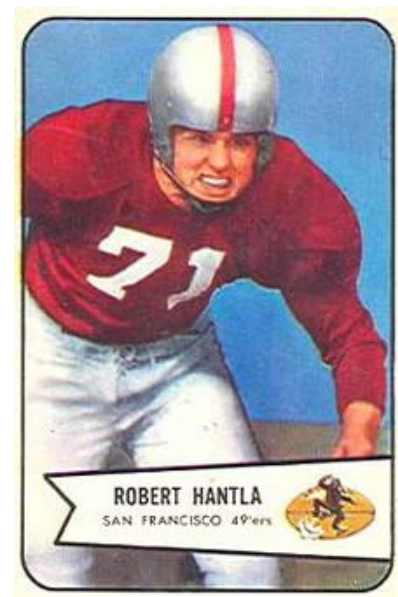
Many more, however, seemed content to devote the vast majority of their energies solely to their chosen sport. The result of this selective dedication meant the gridiron received a higher priority than grades. Over the course of 1951-52 – to

in those years.



"The Earthshaker." One Varsity House resident who would later achieve professional gridiron fame was Galen Fiss. Nicknamed "The Earthshaker," this powerful, hard-hitting linebacker played for the Jayhawkers from 1950-52. Later drafted by the Cleveland Browns, Fiss became one of the team's starting linebackers in 1956, a position he held for the next 11 years. During a portion of this time, he counted among his teammates one of the game's all-time great running backs, the legendary Jim Brown. Over his long career with Cleveland, Fiss earned two Pro Bowl selections (in 1963 and 1964) and an NFL championship ring in 1964 as well. He retired from pro football after the 1966 season.

Image: Vintage Football Card Gallery



Nine Year Pro. The other Jayhawker who went on to the NFL during this period was offensive guard

take just one academic year as an example – the 34 men of Varsity House registered the single lowest grade-point-average on campus, earning a collective 0.91 on a 3.0 scale (roughly equivalent to a 1.2 on today's more familiar 4.0 scale). In other words, the residents of Varsity House scored a collective "D" average that year.

By way of comparison, members of the Sigma Xi science honor society, the University's top grade achievers in 1951-52, boasted an average 2.62 out of a total possible 3.0 GPA. "It's a wonder," Varsity House alum Harry Solter remarked rather frankly, "that we all didn't flunk out of school." (For Solter himself, the experience was not apparently an intellectually debilitating one, as he went to serve 31 years in the US Marine Corps, retiring in 1989 as a full colonel.)

While admitting that he and his fellow athletes did, of course, have "great fun" while living in Varsity House, Solter also maintained that unbridled revelry was hardly a common occurrence, especially during football season. Solter further claimed this was not the case for what he described as the men's "biggest nemesis," that being the Phi Psi fraternity house situated diagonally across Indiana Street.

The Phi Psi members, Solter recalled, "would [always] be out getting crazy with their pledges or coming in from partying on Friday nights. Many of us [in Varsity House] had athletic events on Saturday or would be just trying to sleep through all their noise. I don't remember any physical altercations," he added, "but there were plenty of verbal insults thrown back and forth. We would yell at them to stop beating their pledges and they would call us 'dumb jocks.'"

Had there been any resort to fisticuffs, however, the smart money would surely have been on the men of Varsity House. For despite the Jayhawkers' failure to win any Big Eight Conference titles during the 1950s, KU did field some very solid football squads in those years.

Perhaps the most prominent Varsity House resident who went on to achieve professional gridiron fame was Galen Fiss. Nicknamed "The Earthshaker" during his KU days, this powerful, hard-hitting linebacker – who oftentimes doubled as a hard-charging fullback – played for the Jayhawkers from 1950-52. Later drafted by the Cleveland Browns, Fiss became one of the team's starting linebackers in 1956, a position he held

Bob Hantla, who lived in Varsity House from 1951-53. Drafted in 1954 by the San Francisco 49ers, he played two seasons for that franchise, then spent another seven years in what is now known as the Canadian Football League.

Image: Vintage Football Card Gallery



Mixing It Up. With the 1956 opening of Carruth-O'Leary Hall as a dormitory, the majority of former Varsity House residents moved into this new facility. Some football players did remain, however, and apparently managed to create a mini, jocks-only fiefdom on the home's third floor.

Image: University Archives



Mother, Mom, And Aunt. Like their football forebears, the men who lived in Varsity House post-1955 – mostly non-athletes – were also watched over by a housemother. Her name was Mrs. Madge McElhinney (center) and, according to resident H. Scott Beims, "Mrs. Mac" was similarly beloved – "the sweetest person," he said, "that I have ever known." Incidentally, "Mother Mac," as she was also called, was the real-life mom of one Varsity House resident at this time, Charles "Mick" McElhinney, and the aunt of another, John Cecil.

Image: The Jayhawker, 1956-57



Do Drop In. Among Varsity House resident Jerry Konop's most vivid memories was watching the

for the next 11 years – a period during which he counted among his teammates one of the game's all-time great running backs, the legendary Jim Brown. Over his remarkably long career with Cleveland, Fiss earned two Pro Bowl selections (in 1963 and 1964) and an NFL championship ring in 1964 as well. He retired from pro football after the 1966 season.

Another Jayhawker who went on to the NFL during this period was offensive guard Bob Hantla, who lived in Varsity House from 1951-53. Drafted in 1954 by the San Francisco 49ers, he played two seasons for that franchise, then spent another seven years in what is now known as the Canadian Football League (CFL).

Following the end of the 1955-56 academic year, Varsity House entered its own semi-retirement of sorts when it ceased being a home primarily for the use of KU football players. With the opening of Carruth-O'Leary Hall as a dormitory, the majority of former Varsity House residents moved into this new facility.

Some football players did remain at 1043 Indiana Street, however, and apparently managed to create a mini, jocks-only fiefdom on the home's third floor. Many others (including those still living in McCook Hall) continued to come and eat their meals in the basement cafeteria. Yet for the most part, Varsity House – the name it nonetheless retained and, indeed, still bears – became predominantly populated by non-athletes for the next three years.

Like their football forebears, the men who lived in Varsity House post-1955 were also watched over by a housemother. Her name was Mrs. Madge McElhinney and, according to resident H. Scott Beims, like Mrs. Jeter, "Mrs. Mac" was similarly beloved – "the sweetest person," he said, "that I have ever known." (Incidentally, "Mother Mac," as she was also known, was the real-life mother of one Varsity House resident at this time, Charles "Mick" McElhinney, and the aunt of another, John Cecil.)

The members of this second wave of Varsity House residents shared many other things with their more sports-minded predecessors, particularly the warmth of reminiscences the home itself inspired. "It was a most enjoyable experience," recalled Jerry Konop, "for a very young 18-year-old away from home for the first time. At Varsity House," he continued, "there was a good mixture of

1957 KU basketball team's "triple overtime loss to North Carolina in the NCAA finals on that old sputtering/snowy TV." In fact, the KU's star center, none other than Wilt Chamberlain himself – who lived in Carruth-O'Leary Hall – may well have lamented the tragic loss with the men of Varsity House at some point shortly thereafter. According to former resident Carl Mellor, "The Stilt" was friends with Henry Grooms and Al Stevenson, two third-floor KU football players, and was a "frequent" mid-50s visitor to 1043 Indiana Street.
Image: University Archives



Home Is Where The Hangout Is. Looking back, former resident Ray Bower spoke for many of the hall's denizens when he recalled how "Varsity House was home away from home where varsity athletes could just hang out and be themselves. I am so thankful," he added some 50 years hence, "for my opportunity to attend KU and live at the Varsity House with [all] those great guys."
Image: University Archives

In the years since 1043 Indiana Street ceased to be used as a regular housing facility, the building has hosted occupants ranging from the University's Child Research Lab to the Center for Biomedical Research. As of 2005, KU's Custodial Services division and the Department of Environmental Stewardship were calling Varsity House home.



01/01/1948 Orange You Just Crushed?

service veterans on the GI Bill, students who had [had] college experience and who were now going to KU, and incoming freshmen.”

Foremost among Konop’s recollections was “watching Don Larsen pitch a perfect game” for the New York Yankees in the 1956 World Series and the 1957 KU basketball team’s “triple overtime loss to North Carolina in the NCAA finals on that old sputtering/snowy TV.” (The Jayhawks’ star center on that team, none other than Wilt Chamberlain himself – who lived in Carruth-O’Leary – may well have lamented the tragic loss with the men of Varsity House as well. According to former resident Carl Mellor, “The Stilt” was friends with Henry Grooms and Al Stevenson, two third-floor KU football players, and was a “frequent” mid-50s visitor to 1043 Indiana.)

For Walter Robbins, a native of New York City, Varsity House was especially attractive owing to “the unique variety of individuals living in it. We were a diverse group,” he remembered, “and we all found it to be a stimulating and enjoyable experience to interact with one another.” Among Robbins’ most striking discoveries, in fact, was that “good people – bright, humorous, caring and patient – [can be] found west of the Hudson River. For me, getting rid of that New York attitude was very important.”

“We had a great group of guys,” agreed William Ruedemann. “We all got along very well. Looking back, what a great time,” he added, with a hint of nostalgia. “We all had health, knew exactly, without question, how to fix all the world’s problems. No divorces, kids with problems, mortgages, etc., etc. It’s a damn shame we have to grow up and become responsible adults.”

Yet as it turned out, Varsity House itself – just like its onetime residents – was not ultimately immune to the natural evolutionary process either. Following the end of the 1958-59 academic year, the University decided that 1043 Indiana Street would no longer be used as a regular housing facility. (Most residents were transferred into Joseph R. Pearson Hall.) Since then, 1043 Indiana has remained a KU property, providing quarters for a long litany of diverse occupants.

“Over the last forty years,” wrote the Department of Student Housing’s Fred McElhenie in early 2002, “a parade of small academic departments, classrooms, overflow student housing in the early 60s, storage and administrative offices have kept [Varsity House] viable.”

The football Jayhawkers become the first college team from the state of Kansas to play in a bowl game, squaring off against Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl. (Read more)

10/09/1946 “We Were Out to Save the World”
The University Daily Kansan reports the opening of a new cooperative living residence on Massachusetts Street named after KU student Don Henry, who had been killed while serving with the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War. (Read more)

11/15/1946 Bleacher Creature
Male students begin moving into makeshift quarters underneath the east-wing stands of Memorial Stadium, an emergency post-World War II housing arrangement known as McCook Hall. (Read more)

12/03/1956 Center Of Attention
Wilt Chamberlain, arguably the most dominant player in the history of basketball, makes his spectacular KU debut by scoring 52 points as the Jayhawks crush Northwestern in Allen Field House. (Read more)

09/29/1944 Cut The Caps
Forty World War II veterans, enrolled as freshmen at KU, refuse to don “freshman caps,” thus marking the beginning of the end of this controversial, decades-old tradition. (Read more)

10/03/1946 Divine Provenance
The University Daily Kansan reports that a Vermont Street church has become a temporary men’s student residence. (Read more)

09/26/1949 Barn Dormers
Following more than two months of heavy labor spent converting a former horse barn into a livable student residence, a dozen KU men move into what will become known as the Hill Co-op. (Read more)

08/13/1959 “The House With Five Roofs”
The University of Kansas announces that demolition of Locksley Hall, one of the most unusual living arrangements on the KU campus, will be completed by September 1, 1959. (Read more)

01/22/1946 Artful Lodgers
Amid a post-World War II campus housing crunch, the University Daily Kansan reports that 80 male students – nearly all returned veterans – will soon move into the basement of present-day Spooner Hall, then known as the Spooner-Thayer Museum of Art. (Read more)

These have included the University's Child Research Lab, the Departments of Continuing Education and Special Education, and the Center for Biomedical Research, which for a time in the 1990s operated a dental health lab out of the home's third floor.

As of 2005, KU's Custodial Services division was calling Varsity House home, as was the Department of Environmental Stewardship, manager of the University's extensive, campus-wide recycling program.

For men like Walter Robbins, though, who called Varsity House an actual home during the 1950s, 1043 Indiana Street still evokes feelings that few contemporary, 9-to-5 residents will probably ever experience. "My time in Varsity House," he wrote in 2002, "remains to this day as a warm and special memory which I greatly value." So, too, for Jerry Konop. "As I reflect back," he added, "I have nothing but fond memories of my four years on the Hill and Varsity House was a big part of it."

John H. McCool
Department of History
University of Kansas

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The KU Endowment Association, the KU Student Senate, the KU Natural History Museum, the KU/Coca-Cola Partnership, the KU Department of Student Housing, the KU Libraries, the Historic Mount Oread Fund, the Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies, the Humanities and Western Civilization Program, and KU Edwards Campus have provided additional funding for this project.



Visit the homepage of the KU Department of Student Housing.

Learn more about scholarships for KU student housing residents.

The KU School of Medicine, the KU School of Nursing, the Executive Vice Chancellor's Office of the KU Medical Center, the University of Kansas Hospital, and the KU School of Medicine-Wichita provided support for KUhistory.com to develop the Medical Milestones series about the history of the KU Medical Center.

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