



by Terry Primas

The USO sign was a beacon of comfort for John and Marilyn Roberts during the Korean War. It beckoned before and continues to signal support for men and women in service to their country.

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided it would be best if private organizations provided for the recreation of soldiers on leave. Six organizations (the Salvation Army, YMCA, YWCA, National Catholic Community Services, National Travelers Aid Association, and the National Jewish Welfare Board) pooled resources to form a new organization - the United Service Organizations (USO). The USO is a private, nonprofit

organization, funded by citizens and corporations.

Local communities found the USO to be their avenue for participation in the war effort during World War II. U. S. troop strength grew from 50,000 in 1940 to 12 million in 1944. USO clubs sprang up in more than 3,000 communities, as the centers became a "Home Away from Home". The clubs were volunteer driven and by the end of WWII, more than 1.5 million citizens had served doughnuts and coffee, helped write letters, danced, or simply talked to lonely GIs.

A campaign to establish the USO in the Fort Leonard Wood area began in March of 1941. As the military was still segregated, plans called for separate clubs for White and "Colored" soldiers. Space for a Service Center for white soldiers was secured in the Knights of Pythias Hall in Rolla. In August of 1941, Ruth Chambers, Y. W. C. A. Director of Ft. Leonard Wood Area, and Sara Long, Negro U. S. O. Director, attempted to establish a

Negro club in Rolla. However, no landlord would rent them space for a colored club. Mrs. Long relocated to Lebanon where she established a club in a tent about a mile east of town. Subsequently, land was purchased in Old Town in Lebanon and the government erected a building for the Negro club. It was the first U. S. O. building dedicated in the area. The following year, a Negro club was built in Rolla and operated by the National Catholic Community Service.

Services for the soldiers at Fort Leonard Wood initially came from Rolla. Girls went there in the middle of the week and dances were held at the end of the week. A building was rented in Rolla in September of 1941 by the Y. W. C. A. and dubbed the "White House". It was unfurnished and the first acquisition was a juke box. The volunteer girls put crepe paper drapes in the windows, chairs were borrowed from a funeral home, and the first dance was held on the second Saturday in September.

Work at sprucing up the club began soon. Rag rugs, made from silk stockings and hosiery looping, were woven. Secondhand furniture was repaired and varnished and slip covers made for the used upholstered chairs.

Organization of activities for the soldiers was quick. The "Sunday Night Club" was formed. Coffee and sandwiches were served at 6:30 p.m. Books were available one week and music the next for the soldiers and girls. The Library Committee was formed. Members pasted state maps around the room and soldiers wrote their names on their home towns.

Dr. Clair V. Mann of the Phelps County Historical Society interviewed Ruth Chambers of the U. S. O. on May 1, 1943. She spoke nostalgically of those early efforts in that first White House. "The outstanding activity of the White House was the Christmas tree. The soldiers went out to get this large Christmas tree, about 45 feet tall. After that they gave a dinner. The following week we had a soldiers' chorus who



New colored USO club at Lebanon. Picture taken on Feb 1, 1942. Courtesy of US Army Engineer School History Office, Fort Leonard Wood.



A view of the new USO club for white soldiers in Rolla, February 7, 1942. Now named the Buehler Building, it still stands at the corner of 8th and Rolla streets. Courtesy of US Army Engineer School History Office, Fort Leonard Wood.



A young soldier checks into the Rolla USO Club for an overnight stay in 1942. Courtesy of the Mann Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.



Soldiers and hostesses enjoying soft drinks and conversation at the Rolla USO, 1942. Courtesy of the Mann Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.



Although a little smaller, a similarly designed Colored USO Club was constructed in Rolla. It now serves as part of the City Hall complex. Courtesy of the Mann Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.



Soldiers and young hostesses gather around the piano for a sing-a-long in Rolla USO. Courtesy of the Mann Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.

gave out-door Christmas carols. And the following week there was a Christmas dinner dance. This was in 1941."

On February 7, 1942 the U. S. O., along with the N. C. C. S., moved into the new four story building. The dedication ceremony was preceded by a parade. That evening a dance was held with about 3,000 people present. The new building allowed services to expand. Much assistance was given to the soldier's wives, who were trying to live on the \$22.00 a month allotment. The Hostess Corps averaged about 200 girls from Rolla, Salem, St. James, and some as far away as Sullivan. Dances at the Fort averaged about two a week.

The distance from Rolla to Fort Leonard Wood was problematical and the U. S. O. wanted to operate closer to the post. A building could not be built on the fort. A committee was organized in the fall of 1941, with Mrs. Dru Pippin as chairman of the local board. Temporary rental for a club was arranged above a store on the south side of the square.

Establishing a club was not without its problems. "They kept having a fire every place and had to move furniture out in the street--three times," according to Director Ruth Chambers. "The entire U. S. O. staff lost all their clothes in the fire at Bell Hotel--every stitch except what they had on. Fire was a real hazard at first. The city growing fro 500 to 5,000, which extended from seven miles to the fort was a real problem."

The Salvation Army, under the leadership of Captain Trout, was the first to



A few of the 500 women employees at the laundry on Fort Leonard Wood. They received assistance from the USO, too. The rapid buildup of the post with military personnel and the population explosion of Waynesville from 500 to 5,000 presented real problems for social agencies. Courtesy of the Mann Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.



The south side of Waynesville square, 1941. Projecting from the third building, although not visible in this picture as printed, is a USO sign. This was the first USO, rented space above a store, before the club pictured below was built. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

offer services to soldiers in Waynesville. They were housed in the Baptist Church, beginning in April of 1941. The Jewish Welfare Board also had a presence. According to Mrs. Chambers, "The work at Fort Leonard Wood included talks at the laundry, supplying libraries and magazines to the 500 women employees. We also handled the housing project. There were classes in craft, gym, books and magazines, and community organizations. We also assisted hostesses at Service Club in procuring special programs and recreation halls.

On Sunday, December 7, the staff and 7 girls went to church, had "mess" with the men, and in the afternoon were playing a football game. During the game, they heard the announcement of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The new U S O building, across from the high school, was dedicated on March 7, 1942. Mrs. Chambers described it as "a beautiful California type building--a new building, stucco,

all on one floor. The main lobby is two stories high with a penthouse, which was originally designated as the Jewish wing."

By 1947, the USO had all but disbanded but the organization renewed its efforts in 1950 when the United States entered the Korean War. Marilyn Roberts attests to the continued importance of the U S O to soldiers and wives during that era.

When the draft ended in the 1970s, continuance of the USO program was debated. After a review by social and governmental agencies, it was determined that "If there were no USO, another organization would have to be created...Isolation of the military from civilian influences is not, we believe, in the interest of the nation."

The USO and its programs were reorganized. Its mission was broadened to help military personnel make the transition to civilian life. However, food, entertainment, and good company continue to be at the core of its efforts.



The "white" USO Club in Waynesville, 1942. It was located at the corner of Highway 17 and School Street, across from the high school. The left wing of the structure still stands and is an apartment house. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.



the Forties



Interior of the Waynesville USO Club. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.



Colored USO, 1943. It was under the direction of the Salvation Army. Second from left is Sam Rollins, Waynesville banker. Courtesy US Army Engineer History Office, Fort Leonard Wood.



5th anniversary (1946) of USO as a national organization. Col. Duvall, commanding officer at Ft Wood, cutting cake. (l-r) Roy C. Wilson, presiding judge of the County court; Col. Haare, Post Chaplain; Rev. Sherman, Waynesville Methodist preacher; Col. Lovett; Dru Pippin. Courtesy US Army Engineer History Office.

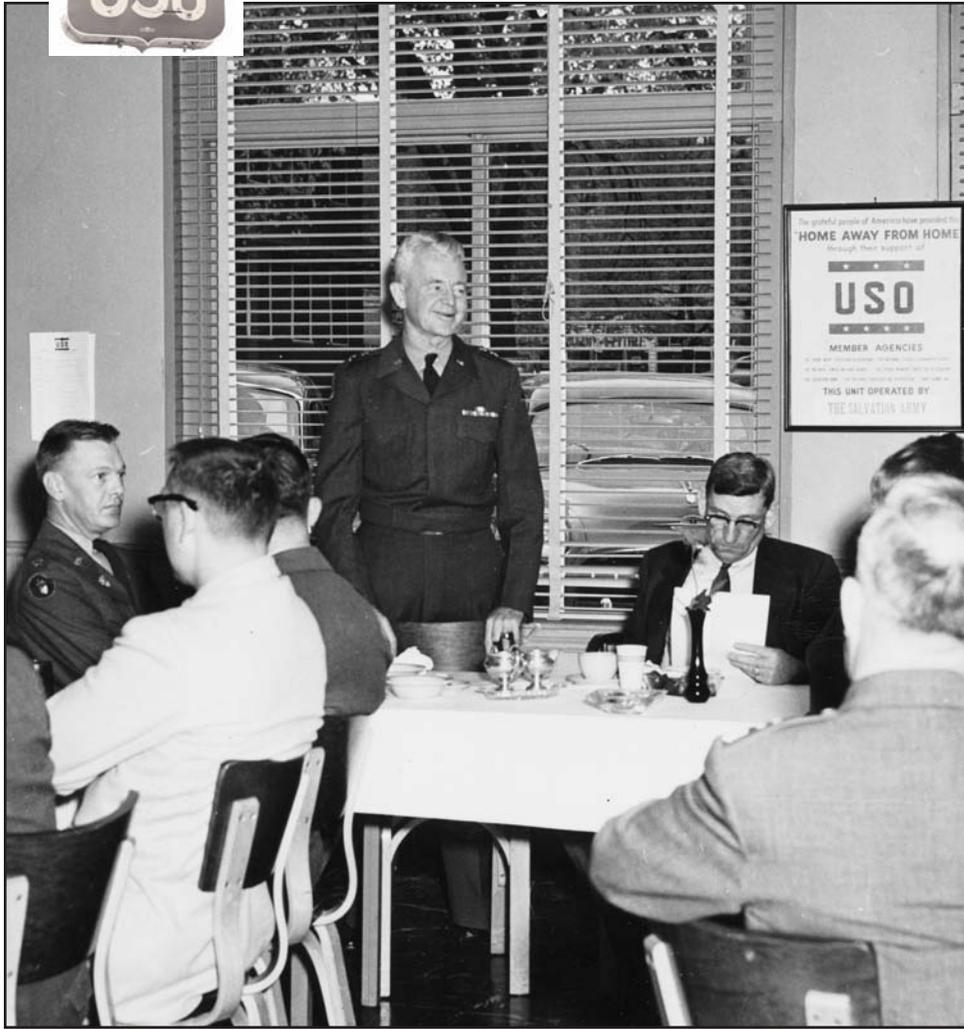


Dedication of the new USO Club for colored soldiers (March 8, 1942) on Route 17, just outside of Ft. Wood main gate. (l-r) C. Sterling Chavis, director of the club; LTC F. H. L. Ryder, post commander; Sarah Hill Long, associate director of the club; LTC Andy Lystad, special services officer. Courtesy of US Army Engineer History Office, Fort Leonard Wood.



Only the chimney is left of the Colored USO Club on Missouri Avenue, just outside the main gate. Photo by Terry Primas.

the Fifties



General Pence addressing the group at the dedication of the USO on the north side of the square in Waynesville. Roy C. Wilson, presiding judge of the County Court is to his left. It was located east of the current post office. Courtesy of the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation.

For more than sixty years, the USO has served the needs of servicemen and their families. The organization vows to stay on the job "Until Everyone Comes Home."



Untold dozens of doughnuts, gallons of coffee, and layers of cake have been served in USOs in Waynesville (above) and around the world. Courtesy of the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation.



General Pence (right) and Pop Furman (left), Director of the Waynesville USO. Courtesy of the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation.

The USO currently operates 124 centers worldwide. There are USOs in 10 countries and 21 states, using the services of 12,000 volunteers.



Brig. Gen. F. S. Bowen, Jr., as post and division commander, is shown here presenting a USO pin to Mrs. Horace Robinson of Waynesville, February 4, 1955. The pin was recognition for 50 hours of volunteer service in USO work. Special Services Officer, Capt. R. L. Norris, looks on. Courtesy of the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation.