

# Assiniboia Housing Co-op marks 21st anniversary

Story by Rod Olstad

Assiniboia Community Housing Co-operative will soon mark its 21st Anniversary. This organization, which today owns five houses with up to 32 members, began its existence known as Campus Co-operative Ltd. in early 1967. At that time, its initiative to provide low cost housing to students at the University of Alberta was a welcome necessity. Neither HUB, nor Lister Hall and Michener Park had at that time been completed.

During September of 1967, the University Board of Governors, whose task it was to oversee university owned properties, approved the rental of six houses to help Campus Co-op get on its feet. However, it was not without caveat. The Board required "that men and women students be accommodated in separate houses." This edit, in spite of the Co-op's request that men and women be allowed to live in the same houses but "have rooms on different floors", held officially firm. However, it is not clear how long the Board of Governors was actually

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able to prevent co-op, co-ed housing — if in fact it ever did.

By the early 1970's, the Co-op had reached its membership peak of about 65 members. At that time, the Co-op represented a crucible of cultural evolution. It apparently provided the first organized, yet unofficial, co-ed housing at the U of A and women played an important role in all aspects of the Co-op's establishment and functioning. The Co-op also played an important role in the University Community. In 1973, University plans to demolish most of the low-cost (but delapidated) housing in North Garneau in order to develop park and recreation facilities met with strong opposition. A well organized



Norwood House

Graphic by M. Boronky

lobbying campaign, spearheaded by Co-op members, succeeded in persuading the University to renovate its North Garneau housing. In so doing, the availability of alternative, low-cost student housing was retained.

That the co-op has survived to 1988 is a tribute to its spirit. The fledgling organization, such as it was, given its transient and temperamental student membership, somehow survived its first 10 years. The ideal survived those perilous early years despite imbalanced books, bureaucratic confusion, and creative excuses not to pay rent. For instance, 1968

member Gordon Dreaver recalls that certain artist members used the excuse that as artists, "society owed them a living." Progress, however, was continuous. In 1969, the co-op purchased its first house and by 1972 its second. In 1972, a new set of bylaws and a policy manual were developed. By 1981, the new name of Assiniboia Community Housing Co-operative was chosen and by 1986 the co-op owned its five houses and had ceased to lease.

Today the ratio of students to non-students is about one to one. The type of non-student

varies widely from recently graduated, to welfare recipient, to the fully employed. This does not conflict with stated goals, of which the primary one is to provide low-cost housing mainly to single adults. As well, the ratio of 50/50 female/male population in each house is an active policy of the co-op. On occasion, vacancies are held open for women. Even though this poses an ongoing financial issue, this policy is considered a valuable safeguard to the quality of a well-rounded co-op lifestyle. Assiniboia Co-op is quite

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different from other similar housing organizations. For example, all residents in University owned housing must be full-time university students. In contrast to this, the co-op's belief is that the integration of younger students and more mature ex-students and graduates enriches the culture of everyone.

That men and women share each house distinguishes Assiniboia Co-op from the fraternities. Co-op members share the cooking and other house chores while fraternities often pay someone to do these things. Another difference is that Assiniboia Co-op does not receive donations from wealthy alumni.

The essence of Assiniboia Community Housing Co-operative is perhaps to be found in considering the relationship among the three to seven people living in each house. Among all members there is a commitment of non-exclusive appreciation, or at least mutual toleration and recognition of differences. There is also the opportunity to develop shared interests and skills. As such this co-op has been an experimental ground for developing the means to establish these values.

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