

From the bottom of my sole

by Sue Eberlein

Imagine yourself on a blizzardy winter's day as you struggle blindly against the wind and through the snow, making your way from home to campus.

Or remember all those mornings you waited for the bus, vaguely wondering whether or not you would have to have your toes amputated for frostbite by the time the bus finally came. Or just think of how you felt when you figure out how much you spent on gas for your car last month.... At such times, have you ever wondered what it would be like to throw all these problems aside and live right on campus?

Stop right there! Do you actually have any idea what it is like to live in a university residence, and are you the kind of person that could do it?

Though residences pretend to vary from school to school, they are all basically the same. Descriptions of the dorms also vary: the U of A student handbook: "The University can provide about 2,159 students with room and board in the Lister Hall complex, with costs ranging from \$1200 to \$1500 (subject to change) per academic year." Then there's the sales pitch thrown at students by private colleges which employ a much more imaginative public relations staff (not to mention a little misleading advertising).

For example, the student handbook of Pacific Lutheran University describes their residence life as "a unique experience in group living," and tosses around impressive phrases like: "The aim of residential living is to help students grow as human beings"; "New knowledge shared with friends in the residence halls takes on a very personal meaning"; and "Students in residence have a unique opportunity to broaden their cultural horizons."

And what's the difference between that cultural utopia and the good old U of A res? Just a few hundred dollars a year. After all, someone has to pay for all that creative writing.

A university residence is a university residence, no matter where or how, and inherent in that title is one word of description: Noisy!

If you are the type of person who likes to be where the action is and where the people are all the time, there are definite advantages to living in residence. You'll make lots of new friends and those friends will always be close at hand when you want to go out, or just talk to someone. There's always something going on in res, no matter what time of day or night, so you need never be bored.

However, there is another side to the same coin. Sure, you'll make new friends. To begin with, the first new friend you'll make will be your roommate, the person with whom you'll share your room, your possessions, most of your waking hours, and (maybe) all of your sleeping hours for the next 8 months. Great! If you can stand each other.

Of course, the University wants to ensure that you and your room-mate will get along. Therefore they have you fill out an in-depth questionnaire as to your tastes and interests in an effort to match you with a compatible person. Very in-depth. They ask you if you prefer a smoker or a non-smoker, period. But they do make sure that you have one other thing in common; room-mates are invariably of the same sex, though whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage is debatable.

But it is amazing how you can learn to live with someone totally unlike yourself, if necessary. In first year university I had a room-mate who was quite a charming girl, except for the fact that she was a cleanliness nut. My cleaning routine is quite simple: I make my bed in the morning so that I have somewhere to throw all my books, clothes, etc, during the day.

Mary, on the other hand, was downright immaculate. She not only made her bed but she beat the dust out of the bed spread, and dusted her book shelves, and vacuumed, and scrubbed the desk and dresser tops, and... What do you do when you awaken early one Sunday morning to discover that the reason your room-mate is making so much noise is that she's busily washing the woodwork?

That leads to another little problem, that of getting enough, if any, sleep. There can be conflicts here between the person who finds his intellect is sharpest after mid-night, and his room-mate, who has 8 o'clock classes every morning.



Studying is impossible

After a while it gets so that it's just too much trouble to go and ask the girl down the hall to turn her stereo down a little so that you can finish the term paper that's due tomorrow morning. Res students almost always study in the library.

No matter how sociable you are, after living in residence for a few months, you will discover that it is almost impossible to live forever without any privacy, and privacy is a very hard thing to come by when sharing not only a room, but also the washrooms, the hallways, the lounges.... Many residence students are in good physical condition due to the fact that toward the end of October they start taking a large number of long, solitary walks.

Turn your back, please

Varying tastes in the amount of association a student wants with the opposite sex can be accommodated in the 3 U of A residences. Henday Hall is entirely men; Kelsey Hall has a few co-ed floors, with the rest being women only; and MacKenzie Hall is completely mixed.

A co-ed dorm means different things, depending on the university. At one I attended, co-ed meant that one wing of the building contained men, the other women. They could associate with each other at any time in the common lounges, but guys still had to be out of the girls wing (and vice versa) by 11 p.m. (midnight on weekends).

Of course, there's the other extreme, where co-ed meant the guy on the third floor with a single room had his girl-friend living with him. That was an interesting situation, especially as there weren't supposed to be any girls living in that building. (A few of the guys were known to get rather upset when they were going about their business in the washroom late at night, only to hear footsteps coming up behind them and a feminine voice greeting them with a cheery: "Don't pay any attention to me...")

At the U of A co-ed means that guys and girls can live on the same floor, but in different wings, and can visit each other (escorted by the person being visited) at any hour. Open visiting hours also apply in the single-sex residences.

If you talk to any student about the living conditions in the dorms, there are two subjects which will invariably be discussed. The first is the lack of privacy (including the fact that double rooms are the size of large walk-in closets, and single rooms are worse). The second is the food.

Tuna by candlelight

Eating in residence does have some very good points. It's nice to be able to have meals with your friends every day, and to have those meals ready and waiting for you (more or less) whenever you want them. There are disadvantages to the cafeteria style of eating for those who are used to quiet meals, but even these problems can be overcome with a carefully planned meal schedule. After all, not that many people want to eat

breakfast at 7 a.m. or dinner at 4:30 when it can be avoided, so it's a good time to miss the crowds.

Early dining has another advantage in that the food will be quite fresh when first served, which is more than can be said of it by 6:30. Residence meals are notoriously bad almost anywhere, and the U of A is no exception.

If you can eat large amounts of starch: bread, potatoes, pasta, you will probably get along just fine. For that majority of the population that tends to gain weight under such a diet, there are salads (often rather limp), and vegetables (usually overcooked) available at lunches and dinners, so it is possible to avoid turning into a blimp.

The average dieter goes one of two ways living in res. Either he gains huge amounts of weight because there's all that food there and he feels it's his duty to eat it and get his money's worth, or he loses weight because once he tastes the first bite he discovers he's lost his appetite.

This is understandable. The main courses often leave something to be desired, simply because it is impossible to cook meals that will please everyone. (Remember the disasters you created while cooking for one? Just think what you'd come up with if you had to fix a meal for 2000!) At least one of the two main course choices at any given meal is generally edible, although there is the occasional day when the number of vegetarians in the crowds increases drastically.

"What's for dinner tonight?" "I think it's sole." "You mean fish?" "No, I mean like the bottom of your shoe."

Though I can't say what the U of A residence's prime meal disaster is, I can name a few from two other schools where I've had the dubious pleasure of living in res. At one, the roast beef was an incredible product. Served in very thin slices, it looked succulent, but was impossible to cut with even the sharpest knife. (And knives in res are invariably dull, probably because someone is afraid of what a student might decide to do with a really sharp knife one day when the food is unusually bad.) However, it was soon discovered that if you took your roast beef with you and let it set for a few days, it could be made into wonderfully sturdy sandals.

Another favourite meal I encountered was a catastrophe entitled Turkey Tetrastini. No one ever discovered what it contained, but whenever it was served the Chinese restaurant down the street did a booming business.

However, the close proximity of the res cafeteria to the campus is once again an advantage that will override many of the disadvantages. Even if the food is not wonderful, it is better than carrying peanut butter sandwiches, skipping meals entirely, or fighting with vending machines that will eat your coins three times out of five without spewing forth the soggy sandwich or dubious beef stew for which you were hoping.

The same proximity to campus that is an advantage in so many cases becomes a disadvantage after a while. It is bad enough to have to spend all day at the University; if you have to live there all night as well it begins to wear on the nerves. Transportation costs to and from classes are reduced enormously, but some new costs crop up due to the simple fact that if you don't get off campus sometime, you will go stark raving mad. Luckily the U of A's central location is conducive to escape: one is able to get away and do something different without too much difficulties.

I lived in residence at one school where city buses came only every 2 hours, where you would have to take a 45 minute bus ride to get anywhere, only to find when you got there that it wasn't really worth going. In such a situation there are three possible choices: A) go insane B) buy a car and get away from the campus whenever you want to C) change universities. For someone who is always broke, B is out of the question. A is not an overly inviting prospect, so by process of elimination I am now living at home and going to U of A.

Could you live in residence? It's not for loners or for those who need long hours of sleep or studying. But for those students who like being around people most of the time or for those who are in a strange city and want to make friends, it can be an interesting and rewarding experience. No matter what, it is guaranteed to be an experience.