

# The Michigan Daily

## Right at home

With 90 years of tradition, Martha Cook is more than an all-girl residence hall.

By Emily Beam

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To an observer, the Martha Cook Building feels more like a museum than a residence hall. Everything from the vaulted ceilings looming over the Venus de Milo replica to the ornate Steinway dominating the Gold Room conveys a certain elegance and sense of "do not touch." To its 144 residents, however, this is home. A visit to the dining room during mealtime or a trip upstairs reveals that indeed, women do live here, although the hall bears little resemblance to its University residence hall counterparts. Lack of men aside, everything from the relatively silent corridors to the friendly scarecrow door decorations suggests there is something that distinguishes Martha Cook from the rest of the University.

Martha Cook Building opened 90 years ago this fall, only a semester behind the first women's residence hall, Helen Newberry. William W. Cook built the hall as a gift to the University in remembrance of his mother. "Much as I value intellect, I put character and womanly grace above it," he wrote. Cook recognized the importance of higher education for women but also hoped Martha Cook would help its residents develop the "charm and grace and principles of American womanhood." In that respect, not much has changed; the building is still a mixture of the progressive and the traditional. Those who like its small size, its traditions and its tight-knit community come back year after year - sometimes through graduate school - while those who don't soon move out. Martha Cook remains an important part of its women's lives after graduation as well; the building is the only dormitory to have an alumnae association, which boasts over 700 members, and the women often remain involved with Martha Cook throughout their lives. Former Cookies who had graduated decades ago showed up for the Martha Cook Building 90th anniversary celebration last month, all enthusiastically recounting their days at Martha Cook as if they had just left the University.

### One Cookie's tale: from resident to director

Olive Chernow, former resident and hall director, attended the reunion and exemplifies the dedication these women demonstrate toward their hall. Chernow started at the University in the fall of 1943 during the height of World War II. She spent her first two years living in the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house, temporarily converted to women's housing because the female dorms were filled. Chernow joined the United Service Organization in hopes of meeting the few men who remained on campus and also volunteered rolling bandages. "Everybody was doing something," she said.

When the war ended in 1945, Chernow moved to Martha Cook and quickly integrated herself into the social life and community. "The whole world was celebrating - I got to see what

college life was like."

Thirty years later, Chernow returned to Martha Cook as hall director from 1973-1979, determined to pay back all she had received from the hall during her college years. Although relieved to be back home, she did not anticipate the many changes the dorm had undergone in her absence.

"I had re-entry shock," she said. "The first thing I did was lock the door." During her time at Martha Cook, students leaving the building after 7 p.m. had to sign in and out, but now residents have keys to the front door and could freely come and go.

Chernow found it a challenge for the women to handle the many new responsibilities they had when compared with her generation. "I was shocked to see how much freedom they had," Chernow said. By encouraging formal dances - even starting ballroom dance lessons for the women who didn't know how to dance - she did what she could to preserve the "tradition of gracious living" that she remembered and loved from her days at Martha Cook.

One of her fondest memories as director was when President Gerald Ford came to the building for dinner. In her book, "My Years at the Martha Cook Building," Chernow recounted the excitement of the president's visit, the inspection by the Secret Service and the red carpet she purchased especially for Ford. During the dinner, one of the girls asked Ford if he ever dated a Martha Cookie, and according to Chernow, "He replied that the last time he came to MCB it was with different interest and different motivation."

"The residents were just as impressed with the handsome secret service men as they had been with President Ford," she wrote, "Later that evening, several residents went out with the secret service men in the group and had lots of exciting tidbits to tell us the next day."

### **"Telephone conversations shall be limited to five minutes"**

Compared with other University residence halls, Martha Cook may seem like the last holdout of the days when the University acted in *loco parentis*, serving as a guardian for young women living away from home for the first time. The 1932 Martha Cook Building bylaws reveal a world in which telephone conversations were limited to five minutes and residents had to tidy their room each week in preparation for its weekly cleaning. Weekday curfew was 10 p.m., and women could return as late as 1:30 a.m. on Friday nights. In the 1940s, men could visit residents' rooms once a year for two hours on a Sunday afternoon, and Chernow recalled that residents "redecorated to get ready for the big day." Most University residence halls were co-ed by the late 1960s, but according to current Board of Governors president and former resident Catherine Davis, who lived in Martha Cook from 1968 to 1970, men were still only allowed on the upper floors on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons.

Appearance was also regulated in Martha Cook. For years, entrance to the Gold Room and dining room required a skirt, and pantsuits were not permitted for sit-down dinners until 1972. Connie Amick lived in Martha Cook during the mid-1950s and said that her hall director had "strong feelings about what was proper" and did not permit residents to cross their arms while waiting in line for dinner.

Today, very little remains of the curfews and dress codes that kept previous generations of Cookies in line. But, as is well known around campus, men are not allowed in the upper floors at night, and all guests must be escorted by a resident. Some students might shudder at the thought of being subject to these restrictions, but the women of Martha Cook hardly seemed to mind - many prefer knowing they can walk down the hallway at night without running into any men.

## Tea and tradition

The Messiah dinner, Friday afternoon teas and formal dances form the core of the Martha Cook experience but some classes have tried, with varied success, to establish their own traditions. In 1919, seniors started Ivy Day, on which students would head to the north side of the building to plant ivy. The ivy refused to grow, and residents abandoned the tradition only a few years later. May garden parties dated back to the late 1920s, when, according to the 1946 annual, "someone realized that both the terrace and the sweep of the lawn offered infinite possibilities for a spring party." Recently, residents have re-introduced a once-lost tradition to their sit-down dinners by placing a spoon turned upward or downward above their plate to indicate whether they want coffee or tea following dessert.

The Lawyers Tea is one of the building's most important annual formal teas, originally started because Cook wanted "future lawyers residing in the Law Quad to meet good, respectable wives who would at the time reside in the MC building," according to an e-mail from LSA senior and assistant resident director Londisa Halili.

Indeed, the general absence of men has made them focus of significant attention in both Martha Cook's traditions and daily life throughout its history. The rooms facing the Law Quad were once coveted for the view they offered - of male law students living across the street - the 1946 annual - the Martha Cook yearbook - bragged that former residents were more likely than average to get married. Current residents joked that some women can pick up the slightest hint of cologne if a man is present in the hall, and Halili described a recent mealtime debate over which group of men on campus is the most attractive. Today's women are far less hurried to get married than in the past, but even so, "A lot of girls here get engaged their fourth year," Halili said.

Martha Cook myths are a tradition in themselves. In 1916, editors of the Martha Cook annual were among the first to attempt to dispel such misconceptions regarding the girl's preparation for the outside world. They entreated critics to visit the hall, "They will gaze in astonishment at the straggling line of hungry looking girls who are precariously balancing trays and receiving their daily dole of soup," the editors wrote. "My friends, this is the bread-line, and your fairy princess is engaged in that most plebian of occupations - indulging in a self-serve lunch." Despite their humble lunches, residents still had their rooms cleaned and linens changed weekly.

Today, Martha Cook's women do their own laundry and clean their own rooms, but they still laugh about the rumors surrounding their charmed lifestyle. They've heard rumors that women must wear gloves or uniforms to dinner or that men are banned from the dorm entirely. According to the residents, some freshmen moving in still believe they must be back before curfew.

## " - to gather together the choicest spirits of the University"

Both past and present Martha Cook residents are eager to describe the strong sense of community they associate with the building. Today's residents take part in frequent social events like international movie nights and formal dances that foster a close-knit environment. Halili said most of her closer friends either live in Martha Cook or started there but later moved off-campus.

"Everybody knows each other," Halili said, "When you walk down the hall, you hear a 'good morning.'"

"The building was built to gather together the choicest spirits of the University for their influence upon each other and upon the University itself," Cook wrote. Each year, enough women are attracted to Martha Cook's beauty and its warm environment to ensure the building has no trouble finding women to fill its rooms. In the 1970s, residents were selected based on academics, activities and two interviews. Catherine Davis remembered that consequently, the hall was "very high on an academic scale." She compared the anticipation of waiting for the interview invitations to arrive in the mail with sorority bid day. Today's process is far more relaxed, consisting only of an application form and essay. But current residents agreed that it was intimidating at first. Halili was afraid that she wouldn't be accepted to Martha Cook, which would have relegated her to Mosher-Jordan Residence Hall for her freshman year. "I was just terrified," she said.

In some ways, Martha Cook resembles a traditional version of a sorority more than a dormitory. "The only thing we don't have is rush," Halili said.

"I just think it's a wonderful community to belong to," said hall director Marion Scher. She agreed that sororities might share some of the same goals as Martha Cook - both are trying to "create a close community of women."

Martha Cook has "a little different style of living - a little bit more traditional," former resident Jennifer Davis said. A visit to a sit-down dinner confirms Davis's observation. The sight of nearly 150 women standing over their places singing grace - in harmony - is one unique to Martha Cook, but one that, with slight fashion changes, could have taken place any time in the building's history. Today's Martha Cook is not a radically different place from the residence hall that first opened its doors in 1915. The days of forbidden victrolas - one of the few conditions Cook himself stipulated - have long passed, but Martha Cook Building and its residents continue to share the same values and way of life as their predecessors.

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