

Open House Held This Week For Peoria's Renovated USO Club

This week the newly renovated Peoria USO club is expected to receive its 175,000th Serviceman visitor. The addition of the largest dance floor boasted by any USO in the middlewest, plus the re-modernizing of the club fa-

...adds a milestone to the morale building swath cut into the history of this war by the United Service Organizations. Despite the torn up condition of the Peoria club during the re-modeling, and the innumerable inconveniences caused thereby, it continued to cater to the needs of the Servicemen throughout without faltering.

Local Funds.

Founded by the Peoria USO Citizens' Committee a year before the opening of Ellis, the club is partially sustained by funds from this organization. At its start the club was strictly a local affair using no national funds, and was thereby a tribute to the patriotic spirit of the Peorians.

Under the present system about two-thirds of the club's funds are provided by the national USO and one-third drawn from the local Citizens' Committee.

In May of 1942, the first Peoria club had its start in the Alliance Life building, on the corner of Main and Jefferson streets. Director at that time was Frank Walsh, a St. Louis man active in Catholic circles there.

Many Groups.

The Peoria club is sponsored by the National Catholic Community Service. Most Servicemen know little of the organizations that make up the USO; they think of it as just one group when actually it is composed of several groups uniting to do the job on a grand scale.

Besides the Catholic group there are the YMCA, the Salvation Army, the YWCA, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the National Travelers' Aid Association.

Operating Costs.

Renovation of the present club at 517 Fulton street was made at a cost of \$20,000, of this \$10,000 came from the national fund and a like amount from the local citizens.

Furnishings for the present club ran about \$5,000. Not counting the salaries of the directors, monthly operating expenses come to \$1,000.

McGrath Takes Over.

While plans were being made for the Fulton street site, the original club moved from the Alliance building to quarters directly across from the Pere Marquette hotel on Main street. That was in November of last year, and it was at that time that the present director of the club, John McGrath, took over from Frank Walsh.

McGrath, a former Milwaukee, Wis. man, has a background of teaching in Washington, D. C., and Boston, Mass. schools. His ability to understand the problems of the Serviceman and his sincere interest in them quickly won him good repute in USO circles.

Brought in as McGrath's assistant was Rosemary Hefferman, of Green Bay, Wis. Miss Hefferman was a teacher in Wisconsin schools before joining the USO. One of the tasks she now performs is the management of the junior hostesses, of which the Peoria club has well over a thousand.

Hurdles Obstacles.

USO councils are formed in all cities and towns that house local clubs; their function is to aid as well as oversee activities sponsored by the club. In Peoria the council is headed by Edgar Bill, president of the Peoria Broadcasting Company.

"Whenever I run into obstacles I can't hurdle or move myself," says McGrath, "Bill is the fellow I see, and he always comes through."

Another aid to the club is the operating committee headed by Michael Crowley, who is known to the USO people as a hard-worker in their interest. This committee meets once a month to take up routine problems, but may call a meeting any time the occasion demands. They use the influence in local circles of the prominent members that make up

the committee to produce transportation, food or to meet special emergencies.

Volunteer Groups.

Among volunteer groups giving service to the Peoria club are the Volunteer Hosts and Hostesses, headed by Mrs. R. D. Hart; the American War Dads; the Army Mothers Club; The Navy Mothers Club, and others too numerous to mention.

Director McGrath believes in staying in the background and calls upon the local people whenever he is able; this policy helps cement friendships between the Servicemen and Peorians.

Week-End Problem.

"My biggest problem, and the one I devote the most time to, is keeping Servicemen entertained over week-ends. My Saturdays and Sundays are spent arranging picnics, dances, and parties, as well as finding sleeping accommodations," he said.

"Not until I can get them started back to camp, just a little bit happier than they came in, do I consider my work of aiding Servicemen finished for one week. And then Monday, an another build-up for the coming week-end, is just a few hours away."



— USO DIRECTOR —

John McGrath was on his way to the west coast when orders from the national USO headquarters changed his trip ticket to read "Peoria, Ill."

He had just finished a year as director of the USO club in High-

wood, Ill. second home of the Ft. Sheridan soldiers when they're out on short passes. Before that, he handled a club down in Pensacola, Fla., near a Naval air station.

McGrath took over the Peoria club in November last year, when facilities for the number of Servicemen attending the club lagged almost hopelessly behind the standard that USO directors like McGrath maintained.

His secret of success is no secret to the people that know him, it's simply work, and more work, seven days a week and sixteen hours a day.

Peoria's club is using the services of McGrath before the end of this month, he's headed for one of the biggest USO assignments available, in Honolulu, Hawaii. An idea of the size job that awaits him can be had by noting that the new club services some 20,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines daily.

Thirty-one-year-old McGrath is originally a Milwaukee, Wis. man, but he's done a lot of traveling since he last left that city.

He received his M. A. from the Catholic University in Washington D. C., and remained to teach there. Later he taught at Harvard's famous Boston Center for Adult Education, an experimental school teaching the enjoyment of learning rather than stressing learning in itself.

He left his teaching job when turned down by the Army and went into USO work to do what he could for the war effort. His record with the USO since is the kind that is responsible for the high regard that men of the armed forces have for that organization.



OH, WOULD THAT WE HAD KP'S LIKE THESE. Three lovelies of the Peoria USO say "Come and get it, soldier!" during open house week at the club. No urging needed, we say. They're serving punch, but they're enough to make any guy punchy without a taste of the stuff. For your information, left to right (tel. ephone numbers a civilian secret) are Mary Jean Ritchey, Caroline Brown and Dorothy Will.



PEORIA'S REMODELED USO HAS EVERYTHING say first GI visitors to the club. Diving into the cookie jar at the snack bar is Pvt. Joe Pluta, Co. C, 135th Bn., 30th MTR, while Pvt. Fred Koerner, Co. C, 129th Bn., 29th MTR, looks on nonchalantly. Behind the counter are volunteer workers Ethel Phillips, Mary Ryno and W. Becker. Lending moral support to bowlers using the



model bowling alley are Mary Jean Ritchey and Rosemary Hefferman, assistant USO director. Gathered in the main floor lounge of the renovated club enjoying cokes are Ruth McWhirter, Cpl. Thomas Henderson, 672nd QM Svc. Co., Florence Willa, 7th Maurice Lackey, 1674 Hqs. Gd., and Mary Jean Ritchey.