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## What is W.O.W. Hall? *Chronicle of an arts center in an arts city*

John Pincus was moving while he was standing still. The coordinator-producer-bookkeeper-manager-general organizer of the W.O.W. Hall was preparing for a "Shelia and the Boogiemens" show on a recent night. He didn't have much spare time, but was wholeheartedly accomodating in the interest of the hall. I followed him around the 50-year-old building as he started up the barkdust boiler in the basement.

The building was dark, few people were there. But in a few hours the hall would reverberate with dancing, laughing people — a common happening at W.O.W. Hall, also known as The Community Center for the Performing Arts.

Standing behind this entertainment scene are numerous hard-working and dedicated people, like Pincus, who have met with many threatening crises to their beloved W.O.W. Hall.

*Story by Shannon Kelley  
Photo by Michael Clapp*

W.O.W. stands for Woodmen of the World, a fraternal group similar to the Elks, with overtones of a labor organization. The Woodmen of the World became a strong labor force in the early 1900s.

By 1920 they were a powerful group in the Eugene area. In 1932 to meet the needs of the growing organization, the existing W.O.W. Hall was built on the corner of 8th Avenue and Lincoln Street. At that time, the building was used for Boy Scout activities, dances, concerts and theater on a small scale.

In the early 1970s, the Woodmen of the World started to decline. The building was then leased by Bill Mulholland to several different groups, including the Oregon Repertory Theatre in coordination with the Free University that was initiated by Cindy Wooten and Bill Wooten.

But Mulholland found that he couldn't afford the building. After two years, the lease was turned over to

the New Globe Repertory Theatre. Theater and dance blossomed in the hall.

It became clear that the hall could not continue financially under the chaotic management. Pincus describes this period as "disorganized and incoherent." But it was also the birth of a new W.O.W. Hall.

Many people thought the historical building should be demolished and the site used as a parking lot. However, another group of concerned people — performers and others who used the hall — felt the building should be preserved. They formed the Committee to Secure a Westside Community Center for the Performing Arts.

Their goals were numerous: to prevent the demolition of the W.O.W. Hall; to ensure that it was preserved in a historical manner; to find a way to prevent it from passing out of community access and operate the building so that it was convenient to the people who used it.

In 1975, Mulholland agreed that the community could buy the building if they gave him \$10,000 for a downpayment in the next 16 days. In WOWATHON, a marathon fundraiser featuring local talent, the money was raised in five days.

The new W.O.W. Hall was born, and it was the community's; but all was not perfect. There was no operating capital, and people had to volunteer their time to get it going again. Money was acquired from the Eugene Arts Foundation and other groups.

A membership program was established. Members contribute \$10 per year or 10 hours of work per week. Membership has fluctuated from 150 to 400 per year.

New bylaws were established to ensure that the organization was run democratically; in addition a board of directors was established to make policy decisions. Goals were set.

"One of our goals is to ensure that all acts here are accessible to all income groups," said Pincus. "We try to

keep our ticket prices as low as possible."

Response was positive; the W.O.W. Hall gradually returned to solid ground. Employees began getting paid, though the salary was low and not always assured.

The hall became a spawning ground for new local groups.

"Almost all local bands got their start at the W.O.W. Hall," says Pincus.

The diversity of talent — dancing, theater and music, including everything from reggae, rock, folk, classical, punk and more — appealed to a large audience.

The \$1,000-per-month mortgage was the only remaining major burden. In 1981-82, the W.O.W. Hall faced a crucial financial crisis when, under the Reagan administration, the jobs program CETA was terminated.

Carol Caulk, the current director, advised the closure of the hall. They faced a \$50,000 debt and a \$1,000 mortgage. The building badly needed repair as well. For six months the employees worked with no pay.

However, fortune struck when the members landed a second fundraiser, earning \$16,000 in the first three months and \$25,000 in the next two years.

By September 24, 1983 they had paid their mortgage. A mortgage-burning ceremony marked their new freedom.

The hall has rapidly improved in the past few years, says Pincus. The attendance has increased, as has the income from operations. The building has been remodeled, and more plans for expansion and renovation are hanging... in the form of blueprints on the wall.

The people behind the scene still work hard for very little pay to keep the W.O.W. Hall strong. But the bulk of the crises are over for now, and optimism reigns on 8th and Lincoln... at the Community Center for the Performing Arts.