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Bricks and Mortar and More

The Gymnasium

By Dr. Wayne Marty

“Western Union College, thanks to the liberality of its friends in Le Mars and abroad, has as fine a gymnasium as can be found in any school of its size. It was built during the fall of 1908, and has an available floor space of 2800 square feet, with bath and locker rooms in the basement. Lockers with combination locks have been provided and the building is being equipped with modern apparatus as rapidly as possible.” – >From the 1914 Western Union Pilot (yearbook), p 41.

In 1908, “A fine gymnasium” had a different meaning. The game of basketball, invented in 1891, was still new, often played outdoors and in basements or barns. The Western Union gymnasium had a playing floor of 70 ft. x 40 ft. in a building that was only 50 ft. x 75 ft. There was no room for spectators. (The official college floor of today is 84 ft. x 50 ft.) In 1908 A. G.



Gymnasium (from the 1914 Pilot Yearbook)

Spalding was still selling “baskets” that were closed at the bottom (see picture) and when the ball went into the basket it had to be “poked” out with a stick. But now Western Union College had a “fine” gymnasium that was used for the college practice and games until the much larger High School gym was built in 1925.

Paul Pfalzgraff of the class of 1944 remembers practicing in the tiny “cracker box” 1908 gym until the “new” gym was completed in 1941. He recalls the very cold practice conditions because of the poor heating system but also the good times with teammate Jim Borsheim and Coach Dick Crayne. Paul’s latter years at Western Union were during WW II when civilian males on campus were few and the college was actively involved in Naval Air Cadet training. The women’s dormitory, Wernli Hall was occupied by the Naval Cadets who were on campus for six week periods and then moved on for further advanced training elsewhere. Paul recalls that during his senior year he was the only civilian player on the Western Union Basketball team. Eligibility rules



were not rigorous and the cadets made up the remainder of the team as they were available throughout the season.

In the 1940's, when no longer needed for basketball, the white frame building became the Student Union with game tables and Square Dance space available on the gym floor. In the 50's, the basketball court "keyhole" and free throw lines were still clearly showing on the "dance floor". "Real" dancing was not permitted on the Westmar campus until rules were further relaxed in the 60's. The basement of the building was the Student Union snack bar. Wayne Marty in 1952, spent many hours in that basement space with President Kime (former Physics professor), trying to get the first television set on campus hooked up and operating. The closest TV station available at that time was Omaha and the antenna for reception was placed on a tall unused tower that still stood west of the "new" 1941 gym.

In the late 1950's the white frame building was lowered, brick veneered, and renovated upstairs for the Home Economics Department and downstairs for the Art Department. The space contained multiple student kitchens, sewing space, and Dining Room. During the summers, Senior Home Economics students were required to enroll in "Home Management" which required them to live in the building for six weeks and experience "all that is involved" in running a home. Many girls will remember that group living experience. Social Customs class will also be remembered by many attending Westmar in the 60's and early 70's. It involved instruction in acceptable etiquette and manners and the highlight of the course was the Social Customs dinner served to invited Faculty members. It was an opportunity for the students (and the invited faculty) to demonstrate their best social behavior.

Art work with all varieties of media filled the downstairs space. The faculty artist, Bill Cookson, worked primarily with pottery and during his era in the late 60's, a kiln was constructed as an addition to the basement for firing the pottery work. In 1979 the Home Economics department was moved out of the building to Kime Science Hall and the growing Art department, under the direction of Gary Bowling, expanded to use the entire building. Bowling relates that, for several years the Art Club, as a money raising effort, set up a Halloween "Spook House" in the basement space. One year a real Hog's Head was used as one of the "amusement props". It worked well for the Spook House but was not appreciated by Freddie Goodchild, the director of campus maintenance, when some days later he found the Hog's Head deteriorating in one of the campus dumpsters.

There was a major search for space in 1991 when the Theater and Dance Department from the recently closed Tarkio College in Missouri found a home on the Westmar campus. Now the basement became the costume and design work area for the Theater department. After Westmar College closed in 1997 and the buildings were all available for sale, this classic building was purchased by and became a personal Art Studio for Barbara Wells. However the most recent change was the gift of the building to the Le Mars Day Care non profit corporation. Major renovation of both levels, appropriate security systems, and handicapped accessibility now enables this nearly 100 year old building to continue to make its contribution to the good life in Le Mars. A look through the access hole into the attic of this old building will reveal a beautiful varnished attic ceiling – the original ceiling of the "fine gymnasium" that was proudly used by the Western Union basketball team in 1908.

We invite your additional memories or corrections to this Gymnasium story and your notes will be added to the Gymnasium Archive File. In the next newsletter we will discuss Dubs Memorial Hall built in 1920. Send us your memories now.