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Bricks and Mortar and More

Wernli Hall

By Dr. Wayne Marty

Wernli Hall was constructed as a Women's residence Hall in 1922 and is appropriately described by the 1925 freshman, Alice Kruse, "Wernli Hall (with a lavatory in every room) was new. The unfinished rooms of second and third floors -south wing- provided excellent space for storing trunks and stringing clothes lines for drying laundry. The spacious living room served as student union for the campus." (1996 Plymouth County Heritage Book)

Wernli Hall was definitely a center of activity for the campus because students gathered three times a day for their meals in the basement of Wernli until Weidler Hall with a cafeteria was completed during the 1957-58 school year. Meals were served family style and students were assigned to designated tables. The table assignment charts in the dining room waiting hall served as a convenient method for determining the names of other students that might have "grabbed one's eye" during the beginning weeks of school. Trays of glasses for the milk and water were placed by the pillars in the dining hall and one tray of glasses was changed to fragments of glass when a creative serving crew in the 1950's decided to enter the dining hall doing the "Bunny Hop". The hips of one "swinging coed" swung a bit too far and sent the glass flying.

The same serving crew also performed numerous preparation and serving functions. They gathered "early" in the morning before breakfast to dig the eyes out of the "roughly peeled" potatoes. Unpasteurized milk was hauled in from the college farm and poured from the ten gallon cans into the tin pitchers that were lined up on the kitchen floor (one for each white jacketed waiter or waitress). After breakfast on Saturday mornings time was spent dusting the dining hall furniture, folding napkins, and filling salt shakers. Alice Kruse tells that in the 20's cloth napkins were used and because of the seating assignment, the same one could be used all week but on Wednesday (hump day) the napkins were turned over so that a clean side was used for the remainder of the week.

There were three floors of residence rooms with two open staircases from top to bottom. This made it possible to call to the top floor when there was a telephone call or a campus guy waiting to pick up his gal. In the 1940's and 50's there was only one telephone in the building and the number was 282. I still remember it because it was the only number needed to call any of the many Wernli girls. During this same era the door locking time was 10:00 pm. Mrs. Daeschner rattled her keys at that hour and the numerous couples assembled on the majestic West steps exchanged their final handshake or hug or kiss as others came out from the trees and other locations near the building. Many pictures are in the yearbooks and personal collections that show individuals and couples and larger groups sitting on the majestic west Wernli steps that led to the 1st floor social room. Entry to the Basement dining hall was through a doorway under the First floor landing at the top of the steps.



Wernli Hall—West View
(taken from the 1924 Pilot yearbook)

In the 1960's the basement was renovated for additional housing space. The deteriorating west steps were removed and the main entrance for Wernli became the fully glassed "fishbowl" on the back (east) side. The east side was where clothes lines were located prior to the availability of cloth dryers and it was also the back door entry for the male dining room helpers who walked from their dormitories across campus.

Necessary adjustments were always part of the Western Union and Westmar life. During the 1929's depression many faculty members, both married and single, ate in the Wernli Hall dining hall as part of the adjustment for their very low pay. During World War II in the 1940's, the women were forced to find housing elsewhere and Wernli Hall became primarily a Naval Cadet residence for the many taking aviation training in the Western Union classrooms and at the Western Union College Airport.

There were periods of time in the 1970's and 80's when Wernli was at times a Coed Dorm and at times primarily a Men' Residence Hall. College escapades and pranks throughout the years could fill a book and many are known only to the perpetrators. It is known that girls at times "escaped" from the locked dorm and it seems certain that successful Wernli "panty raids" by male students required the cooperation of some females from the inside who could unlock fire escape doors. And would you believe that one coed from the 40's even confessed to being part of the group that varnished the toilet seats in some of the facilities at the end of the hall and claimed that if you watched the students move across campus, you could tell for a week which gals had sat on the sticky varnished seats. My, My, such creativity.

Wernli Hall was demolished on March 12, 2002, 4 ½ years after the college closed. It was an all day job and the last to go were the first floor southwest corner rooms. As I watched the demolition end just as the sun was setting, I remembered that I used to throw rocks at one of those windows to tell my girlfriend that I was at the front door waiting. Many former students hold many good memories (and maybe even some that are not so good) of those days in Wernli Hall. It served well.

The next newsletter will feature the "New" Gymnasium built in 1941. Send us your memories now so they can be included.