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Bricks and Mortar and More

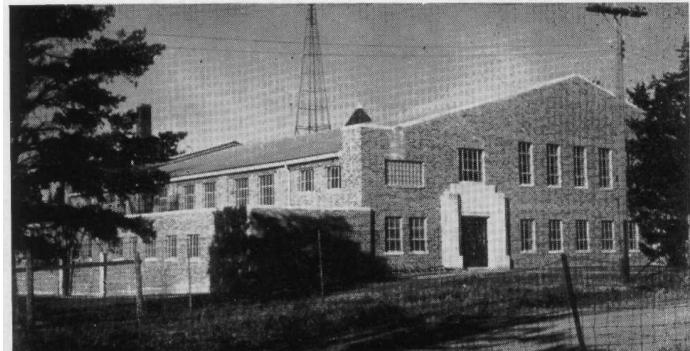
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1941 Gym

By Dr. Wayne Marty

Great accomplishments often begin with dreams and modification of those dreams may occur along the way. The March 29, 1939 Gleam published an architectural sketch of the proposed new Western Union gymnasium and announced the Board of Trustees' decision to raise funds for the project. Basketball had become a popular and rapidly growing sport following the design and introduction of the game in 1892. For two decades the game was often played in barns, sheds, basements and outdoors. Western Union College was a leader in Northwest Iowa when it constructed the 1908 gym with a 70 ft. by 40 ft. playing floor (WAFA Newsletter – February 2007). In 1925 the Le Mars High School built a new gym with a 74 ft by 46 ft. playing floor. Because of the larger size and spectator space many Western Union College games were played in the new High School gym. But there was a growing desire for the college to have a gym of its own with a college size playing floor.

The proposed design had a 90 ft. by 50 ft. playing floor and seating for 1000, with men's exercise rooms, dressing rooms, and showers on the south side and similar facilities for women on the north side. The floor plan published in the December 11, 1940 Gleam also shows a handball court on the west end and space labeled kitchen in the southeast corner near the entry. The dream was still alive and although the supply of building materials was questionable because of the possibility of joining England in the war against Nazi Germany, the building contracts were awarded and the corner stone was laid on June 15, 1941. However, the original "Dream" was reduced. No locker rooms were built on the north side, no handball court was built on the west, and the final main entry was much plainer than originally designed. The October 29, 1941 Gleam announced plans to dedicate the new gym on Dec. 17 "when the Golden Eagles meet the Parsons College Basketball team." Jim Borsheim, now age 90, was the captain of that team and remembers the crowds roar in the new gym during the 43 to 41 win over the Parsons defending Iowa Conference Champions. The furnishings for the new gym were also Spartan. No folding bleachers were installed until the late 50's and wooden bleachers were moved from the football field to the gym as the athletic seasons changed.



The Dream and goal to win was constant in the minds of the many who competed within this space. Basketball greats were abundant – Jim Borsheim – star of the first team that played in this new gym in the 40's; Vic Grothaus, All Iowa Conference Center in the 50's; Jim Sutherland, set Iowa Collegiate scoring record in the 60's; Strathman and Cullinan in the early 70's, Prescott and Hutchinson in the 80's, and many, many others.

Wrestling under the leadership of Coach Milt Martin, Westmar Alum of 1953, brought crowds to the gym. Even though midway through the evening the score often indicated a clear Westmar team win, the crowd remained enthusiastic during each individual match and even the spectators often went home with muscle aches as they twisted on the bleachers trying to help the wrestlers get that pin. Woody Winters, 1968 National NAIA Champion, was involved in the Feb. 2, 1965 "Fiasco" during a decisive Heavy weight match with Wayne State, that brought the spectator crowd from the bleachers and resulted in a forfeited

win for Westmar.

Within these gym walls, Wanda Chittenden's coaching and leadership skills brought women's basketball, and volleyball into prominence.

This new building provided for much more than just athletic events on the main floor. For many years the east balcony was the location for antiquated gymnastic equipment and tumbling mats. It was a space for cheer leading practice, overflow crowds, and even play space for uninterested faculty kids during exciting games. Later the space was renovated for faculty offices.

Memories abound. The Track and Field Record Board used to hang in the north east corner with the 1950's Vic Grothaus records in the Discus and Shotput unchanging for many years. Popcorn was served from the northeast office window. Olsen's "Rowdy Band" rocked the gym in the 70's and the National Anthem was reverently sung prior to each athletic event. "Doc" Ersland attended to his many duties. In the 60's Ralph Allen often sat at his sewing machine in the Men's locker room mending football pants and jerseys. Water was mopped off the gym floor when pipes from the Heating Plant tunnel would occasionally break. There were the many graduations, and concerts and special lectures such as John Howard Griffin, author of "Black Like Me." There were Homecoming Banquets, Presidential Inaugurations, Carnivals, and Donkey Ball games. As Spring approached big nets would sometimes go up for indoor baseball practice. For some, the intramural basketball games were as significant as the varsity games. The required tight scheduling of the gym resulted in 10:00 PM to Midnight Soccer Club practices in the 90's. And remember the athletic halftime events. In the 50's tumbling and trampoline demonstrations filled the halftime space and in the 80's and 90's it was often drill and dance team performances.

The multipurpose use, desire for better acoustics and the energy crunch of the 70's prompted the installation of the insulating suspended ceiling. This ceiling tile solution was not always compatible with the athletic use-particularly volleyball, and soccer, so replacement of tiles often had to precede any public event.

The west wall of the gym has special significance. On that wall hung the pennants representing the teams in the current athletic conference and the names changed through the years as conference alignments changed. During excavation for the construction of the new Life Sports Center in the 1980's, support for the west wall was weakened and Coach Milt Martin, hearing and then watching from his east balcony office observed the entire west wall collapse into a pile of rubble. The wall was reconstructed along with the completion of the new Life Sports Center with a larger playing floor and more spectator space. However, heavy use of the 1941 gym continued. A new activity in the 90's was the continuous all night long 36 hour, "Thunderdome" indoor soccer tournament. A real challenge for the suspended ceiling tiles.

Finally when the college closed in 1997 the gym now owned by the City of Le Mars became part of the combined YMCA-City Recreation complex with its continued multiuse until it was dramatically changed and opened as the new Le Mars Aquatic Center in February of 2007. (Some details of this change were reported in the February 2007 WAFA Newsletter.) The 1941 "New" gym has served well. There were game and match losses and some dreams were dashed but many dreams were fulfilled and are remembered.

Diann (Petersen) Terpstra (1993) recalls, "My favorite memory of the place was the wrestling matches in the "old gym." The bleachers were filled and it was exciting! I'll never forget the match when Ed Huff won the last match of the night to win the team dual and the whole crowd came out on the mat, which made the other team want to protest the win! The officials jetted out of there fast!"

The next newsletter will contain a story on the airport. Your stories and memories are welcome.