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Bricks and Mortar and More

Memorial-Koehler Complex by Dr. Wayne G. Marty

WW II was over and the number of men attending college with GI benefits was increasing. More housing for men was needed, so construction of Memorial Hall began with intended completion by the opening of school in the fall of 1947. But the target date was not met and the 60 guys assigned to Memorial Hall for housing were temporarily provided for by lining up double deck bunks, desks, and clothes racks in the gym. Can you imagine 60 men living together in one room for two months while the new dorm was being completed? There were pranks, guitar playing, singing, and even middle of the night basketball.

After two months of the communal living, the men moved into the new Memorial Hall and were welcomed at the entry with the Memorial Hall plaque honoring the 13 Western Union students killed during the war. The plaque is part of the Westmar collection now housed in the Plymouth County Historical Museum. The new housing was welcome but probably sparse by today's standards with one common bathroom on each floor. In addition to the two person rooms with small closets, there was a reception room with one telephone for the entire dorm, an apartment for the dorm matron, a basement social hall with a Ping-Pong table and a laundry room with one non-automatic washer and clothes lines.

Construction on a 2nd Men's dorm continued and Koehler Hall, with a reversed floor plan from Memorial, was opened for the fall semester of 1949. I arrived as a freshman and together with my older brother, Howard, moved into the 2nd floor southwest corner room overlooking the gym. My beginning of dorm living was smooth compared to Howard's, who was one of the 60 men that lived in the gym for two months in 1947.

Our living together was good. We had a few courses together so could study by yelling questions and answers across the room. Our dorm recreation sometimes included little wind-up cars that we would race in the hallways and a pair of fencing foils that made for good brotherly "fights" during break times.

A special occasion in the basement social space was a President's Tea arranged and

managed by Jim Zottnick. Jim was a big all-state football player from Montana who resisted freshman initiation directives that were commonly accepted at that time. This resulted in a few physical incidents but Jim had a softer side that led to the entertainment of President Kime in the basement social hall with glass punch bowl and glass cups.

Memories include the slaughter of a muskrat that found its way into the dorm via the basement sewer. A contrasting animal memory would be my brother, Howard, a pre-theological student, baptizing a dog at the central hall drinking fountain.

Pranks were also a part of dorm life, like setting a bucket of water on a mop that is propped against a room door and then knocking. The occupant is doused when he opens the inward swinging door. And the embarrassment that follows when one responds to a knock on door with college kid phrase of "Grease your belly and slide under." only to find that the one knocking was the "housemother."

Many Koehler Hall residents could be mentioned. In the corner room opposite from us were Ken Paulson and Lloyd Epley. Lloyd, as a pre-law student, wrote the first constitution for the ASWC (The Associated Students of Westmar College) that became the basis of the student government at Westmar until the college closing in 1997. Rueben Job, who later became a United Methodist Bishop and James Stein who became a Professor of Church History at Garret Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL were roommates in the basement of Koehler. We used to refer to them as the "Ruebenstein" Jews in the basement.

In the 1960's the two dorms were connected with an architectural design that provided additional rooms and a common lobby space. The Koehler name was dropped (some say because Mr. Koehler did not provide the anticipated dorm con-



From: The 1964 Eagle yearbook

struction funding) and the entire complex became known as Memorial Hall.

The latter decades saw many changes. The "Men's" dorm for a number of years became coed with some floors designated for women and some for men. The Koehler end, for a number of years, housed the Health office and Chaplain's office. In the 90's the Koehler end also became the location for the Clark Terry Jazz faculty with associated practice rooms.

In 2002, five years after the college closed, the entire Memorial complex was sold to Leo Langel of Le Mars and the building was gutted and rearranged into 24 one, two, and three bedroom apartments renting for \$400 to \$575 per month. I visited recently with the family of three that now occupies the space that was my dorm room in the 1950s. They like their home as I did when I lived there 60 years ago. At that time I paid \$47.50 for my room for one semester which would be about \$15 per month. So 60 years since their construction, the buildings continue in full use but all is not the same. Change does happen and I guess we can only make an effort to keep involved as we try to manage the change.

Your memories of Memorial Hall are welcome.

Next time we will discuss the various married student housing buildings, so gather your memories and send them to be included in the story.