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Bricks and Mortar and More

Bricks and Mortar and More—Athletic Fields

By Wayne Marty

Can a college compete in a “Track and Field” event if the college has no “field”? Of course it can. Western Union College had significant and successful involvement in athletics in its early history before it had any noticeable physical athletic facilities. The first Western Union year-book was published in 1914 and it reports the success of the college’s early entry into the world of football with a 1911 season of:

	WUC O
Oct. 2—Alton at LeMars	87 0
Oct. 6—Creighton at Omaha	27 0
Oct. 14-Buena Vista at LeMars	16 0
Oct. 27-Mankato Normal at LeMars	30 0
Nov. 3-Buena Vista at Storm Lake	21 0
Nov. 10-Nebraska State Normal at LeMars	57 0
Nov. 17-Augustana at LeMars	39 0
Nov. 30-SD State S of Mines at Rapid City	5 0

WOW! That looks like success but it didn’t last. The record for six scheduled games in 1912 was a 4-1-1. 1913 got worse with only one win and three losses. Two of the losses were to colleges that became long time rivals for Western Union and Westmar. Yankton and Buena Vista both beat WUC that year by terrible identical scores of 82 to 0.

Home football games at that time were probably played in the McDuffie baseball stadium three blocks west of the LeMars Central High School. Travel to some of the “far away” games was probably by train. Track is first mentioned in the 1917 yearbook with plans for an inter-class track meet on campus and “if any fast time is made during the inter-class meet, WUC will be represented in the state meet at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. ‘

Thus football and track involvement proceeded with some irregularity for many years without any significant local supporting physical facilities. In association with the college there was also a Western Union Academy (High School) operating which often functioned to assist older students with the completion of the preparatory work needed to enter college. Eligibility rules for athletic participation were probably sloppy or non-existent. Some students played football throughout both their academy and college years. McDuffie Stadium continued to be the home field for football and all official track meets were probably at away from home locations.

1935 brought a major change. Al Wilken, football player and graduate of WUC ‘38, still remembers, now at age 95, his days of driving a steam roller during the construction of the new Memorial Field on campus. The 1935 football season opened on the new field surrounded by the new cinder track and lighted with the new “carbon arc lights”. Carbon arc lights were bright but usually had to be adjusted periodically so that the bright arc could “jump” between the rods. Does anyone remember if anyone climbed the poles to make those periodic adjustments? WUC finally had its own football field and track and the Sept. 24, 1935 Gleam reports that money was being collected from the LeMars community to build a fence to enclose the new field so that attendance and admission fees could be more adequately managed. The scheduled opening game on the new field was with Dana College from Blair, NE. Interesting that both of these colleges are now closed—Westmar in 1997 and Dana more recently in 2010.



I have found no record of who was being honored by the new "Memorial Field". 1935 would have been 18 years following the 1918 end of WWI but this field served WUC and Westmar college for 23 years. Many football players, runners, cheerleaders, students, faculty and community members will remember the many WUC football and track years that were guided by Coach Dick Crayne, the outstanding University of Iowa football player. Many will remember the pre-game pep rallies with huge bonfires, Marching Band and the Baton Twirlers on the field at half-time and the Gold and Maroon uniforms changing to Blue and White following the merger with York College in 1955. Kingsley native, Vic Grothaus set his long standing javelin and shot-put records in the early '50s with practices on that field.

The next major outdoor athletic facility change was the construction of the 'new stadium' that was ready for the opening of the football season of 1959. The land was purchased by the college in 1953 from the Hahn family (Ella, son Benny and spouse Clara, and Mildred Hahn Eyres) and the planning for the facility was a cooperative venture with the LeMars Central and Gehlan Catholic schools. The facility included a cured cinder track. Early (1900) maps of LeMars show this land as the location of the "Interstate Fair Grounds", Polo Fields and rows of stables. The Polo Fields were busy places in the 1890's when young, wealthy Englishmen were coming to LeMars to "learn farming". The High Schools paid rent to Westmar for use of the new stadium and scheduling of home games was a cooperative venture. The dressing rooms under the concrete seating were modest and rainwater leaks through the concrete joints were common. Football reached a high point in the 1960's under the leadership of Coach Jack Scott with multiple Tri-State Conference Championships.

Peak enrollment years for Westmar were in the late 1960's and began to decline in the 1970's. By this time the LeMars Community Schools had built their new High School and Junior High on Land north of the stadium. The financial struggles of the college made it difficult to provide the expected stadium improvements and in 1983 the stadium was sold to the LeMars Community School and thereafter the college rented the field from the High School. In 1987 the cinder track was resurfaced with cushioned asphalt material, additional seating space was added, the press box was considerably enlarged, and in 1995 the stadium was renamed the Jim Lorenzen Field in honor of the retiring high school coach and long time Athletic Director, Jim Lorenzen, a hometown LeMars native and Westmar graduate of '53.

Memories of activities in that stadium abound—Gerald Olson and the "Rowdy Pep Band", the emotion filled games with Northwestern, Yankton, and Sioux Falls, and colorful Spring Track Meets with the quick sprints, the precision passing of the baton between relay runners, and the graceful enduring rhythmic strides of the two and three milers. Memories enable each of us to relive our own emotions of those days.

