

Bricks and Mortar and More

Bricks and Mortar and More – **Bonebrake Hall**

By **Wayne Marty**

In an ideal setting with a sophisticated audience, it is probably not uncommon to set some lofty goals. Such might have been the case at the dedication of “The New Dorm” on October 16, 1964 on the Westmar campus. The 1965 yearbook states, “For the praise of God and the shelter of His children who dwell here. For the encouragement of quiet contemplation, earnest study, and peaceful rest. We dedicate this house.” I suspect that some of these goals were met by some of the women, some of the time but there is not much prediction of frivolity, laughter, noise, mischief, or even intentional pranks and trickery. Any, who have spent some time in a college dormitory, will recall their variety of experiences - serious moments with serious fellow students and productive discussions but also the times of fun, laughter, fatigue, frustration, and late hours of work because of procrastination.



Dr. E. K. Bonebrake, a long time benefactor who had received an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from Westmar College in 1963. The delayed official naming is unique but no residence hall can be used for over 30 years without being exposed to many changes. Jan Dunbar Kooiker (W '67) remembers that during her freshman year she and others stood at the Wernli Hall windows and watched the construction of “The New Dorm” and especially admired the physique of the young muscular construction workers. When completed for the opening of the 1964 year, at a cost of \$787,000, the dorm was a beautifully designed modern building with a very open appearance because of all the glass on both sides of the lobby. But the 1960s was not a time when energy conservation was a major consideration. The energy crunch of the 1970's brought a new way of thinking and in the 1980's some of the open glass beauty was sacrificed and the amount of glass was reduced as an energy conservation correction. A third floor chapel was part of the original design but changing needs and maybe attitudes in the 1980s led to the chapel becoming a “study room”.



In 1964 the long tradition of “Girls in and Doors locked at 10:00” was still in place and accepted. But standards were changing. Closing hours were extended, particularly on weekends. Designated hours for male visitation beyond the lobby became common but, with the geographical and cultural diversity and the variable family backgrounds of 230 young women, the pathway to acceptable “new rules” was a struggle. Eventually IRV (Inter-Residential Visitation) rules were established that allowed men in the dorms within certain hours. Doors were still locked at designated times but dorm keys were issued and the girls could come and go as they wished. The inside Hallways of Bonebrake also took on a new look in the 80’s when each floor was encouraged to “redecorate” the hallways. It was a pleasant experience to visit each hallway during the Bonebrake Open House and see the creative wall designs. And Fashions changed. Skirts were still the standard classroom wear in the 60’s. By the 80’s, skirts in the classrooms were rare. The semi-enclosed south outdoor court of the U shaped building was a common sun-bathing spot for the dorm residents and bikinis were becoming acceptable. It was also in that courtyard, at 3:30 AM one morning, that Dr. Marty and some accompanying students were throwing pebbles at the window of Sandy Vollan’s room because she did not show up for a scheduled early morning departure for a premedical student meeting at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

And even good activities can deteriorate to rudeness. Nov. 1, 1980 was the first occurrence of the, now very traditional and successful, United Methodist In-Gathering for collection of materials, animals and food for Third World countries. The open area south of Bonebrake was the gathering location. Because it included some gifts of livestock (pigs), Robin Plocher (’83) recalls that there was casual mention of the Bonebrake courtyard as the “Bay of Pigs”. Within a few years, the term became crudely used by the “mean men” on campus to refer to the Bonebrake sunbathers. June Mikkelson (’88) also recalls (picture Gleam Dec. 5, 1984) that in November of 1984 some pranksters successfully deposited a pig through the fire escape door on Bonebrake 3rd East.



This same court was the focal point for a regular summer activity that occurred for over 25 years without much campus notice. Each June, from 1971 to 1997, the annual Merkle Family Reunion was held on the Westmar campus. Esther Merkle, librarian from 1958 to 1971 and Wayne Marty, Professor of Biology 1959 to 1994 were members of that family. The family members and friends gathered from CO, PA, FL, NY, CA, MO, IL, MN, and even Germany and Norway and the 50 to 100 attendees stayed in the Bonebrake rooms with all meals served in the Commons. Meeting and visitation space was in the basement recreation room and family and kids activities, (softball, races, volleyball, etc.) with associated laughter and cheers filled the open space south of the dorm.

Decreasing enrollment in the 80's prompted additional changes. The lower east wing became Faculty Offices for the Social Science Division. Much of the basement recreation space was converted to Campus Security offices.

After Westmar closed in 1997 and the campus became Le Mars City property, "The New Dorm" (Bonebrake) was sold to a private developer. As a women's residence hall, it was common to hear stories about the thin walls between the rooms in the building. The basic building construction was of pre-stressed concrete floors so the walls were non-supporting, un-insulated, frame construction. This made it possible for the developer to remove and rearrange walls and convert the building into the Royal Plaza Apartments with 36 apartments. Generally every four rooms became an apartment. Some space in the main floor lounge has been walled off as a fitness room and a portion of the basement recreation room was excavated to become a year-round exercise swimming pool. 31 single stall garages have been constructed on the south and west sides of the building. The open space south of the building (a soccer practice field for many years) was also sold and is now the location of the Carlsen Funeral Home.

So the "The New Dorm" and surrounding space is still fully used – not as originally intended, but adjustments to change are part of normal living. We wish for many happy activities to continue in that memorable space.

Wayne Marty