

## Bricks and Mortar and More

### The Commons and Centennial Hall (The Gray Buildings)

By Wayne G. Marty

The 1960's were growth years for Westmar College. The 1959 Full-time enrollment of 509 doubled to 1091 Full-time students in 1968. It was a turbulent decade with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, and the controversial Vietnam War. Until the merger that produced the United Methodist Church in 1968, Westmar College was the only Evangelical United Brethren church college west of the Mississippi river and EUB students were coming to Westmar from California, Montana, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and the nearby states of the Dakotas, Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and, of course, Iowa. The Westmar campus was very active with student protests and changes. The long standing No-smoking rules, that produced the quip, "Westmar students die from pneumonia as a result of their smoking in the cold on the street-side curb rather than from lung cancer," were studied, and changed to permit smoking in designated areas on campus.



*Westmar Commons*  
1969



It was also a busy "construction" decade. Bill Johnson (attended York College in the 1940's) was the lead architect for nine building projects on campus during the 1960's, including Bonebrake Hall, Kime Science Hall, Memorial Connection, Wernli Hall Remodel, Old Science Hall Remodel, Married Student Apartments, Library Addition, and the two gray buildings – The Commons and Centennial. The gray was the result of the economical and efficient construction process that used pre-stressed concrete. All of this construction was a response to the rapidly growing number of Westmar Students. Unfortunately, following 1968, there was a steady decline in the number of Westmar students with only 381 enrolled in 1995 (the last data that I could locate). There are probably many reasons but one might surely be that after the church merger, Westmar was now one of five United Methodist Colleges in Iowa alone and the geographical support base was dramatically changed. So the college was literally paying for "Bricks and Mortar", including the two gray buildings, with increasingly scarce funds

The Commons, constructed at a cost of \$850,000, was opened in January 1969, and relieved the crowded eating space in Weidler. The original design provided for the students to assemble in the basement, climb the two central stairways to the cafeteria lines on the main floor, and then eat in the spacious dining room with windows opening to campus views. After several years this intended flow pattern was abandoned and the lines formed on the main floor. It was a common practice for many faculty members to join and mingle with students for the noon meal. This main dining space was also the site of memorable festive events such as Dr. Garrido's annual Copacabana.

The small Zuehl, nicely decorated dining room, named in honor of Dr. Benjamin and Carrie Zuehl, was a common meeting room for small group meal meetings, regular Faculty Senate meetings, and College Board of Trustee Meetings. It was the location for many very major decisions including the merger with Teikyo University in Japan in 1990 and probably the final closing of the college in 1997. A larger space, The International Rooms, with provisions for separation into two rooms, were located on the east end of the main dining room and is remembered as the location where many prominent alumni were granted significant recognition and awards during the Alumni dinner at Homecoming time.

The lower level space was used for large group conventions and party space – Opening of the school year faculty parties, Founder’s Day dinners, the Christmas Madrigal Boer’s Head Banquet and finally a terminal “The End” sad celebration after the announced closing of the college. After Thoren Hall was demolished a portion of the Lower Commons space was fitted with sound-proof practice rooms and became the primary location for the Music Department.



The City of Le Mars has retained ownership of The Commons and it now serves as the Le Mars Convention center. Upper and Lower large meeting spaces are now available and heavily scheduled for Community dinners, wedding receptions, political rallies, city voting location, etc. Kitchen facilities have been removed and remodeling has provided Rest Rooms on the upper level. All food services are now catered from outside but the early college founders would be appalled by the presence of Bar facilities on both levels. Space for the lower level bar was made available by removing the original center stairways. Well’s Blue Bunny leased some of the lower level small room space for their training center for a number of years and had the Vanilla and Chocolate training rooms. That space is now occupied by the Iowa State Extension Offices. The building

continues to be very well used. Centennial Hall has a different end story. The four story Men’s dormitory was constructed during the 1967-68 school year at a cost of \$700,000, and opened for occupancy in the fall of 1968 with space for 154 male students. The Gleam of Oct. 1, 1968 reports, “Men on 4<sup>th</sup> keep physically fit by participating in a fly catching contest while waiting for the screens that were promised at the beginning of the year. Denny Dahmes is floor champ for the week with a total of 44.” 150 guys over a period of nearly 30 years will each have their memories of incidents and pranks. David Hubert from the 1980’s recalls the theft of Dennis Gallagher’s clothes while he was in the shower and remembers Dennis returning to his room wrapped in a newspaper. Learning to adapt is part of the college experience.

New Dorm was the name of this building for the first year but it was named Centennial Dorm the following year – probably because 1969 was the Centennial year for the City of Le Mars. This building is still for sale by the City of Le Mars. After the college closed it was used on a few occasions to house groups of construction workers but has been empty for most of the years since 1997. The remaining Westmar Dorms have all been renovated for apartments but such a project is difficult for Centennial because the interior walls are of concrete block construction. The City had Centennial scheduled for demolition in 2011 after a final effort to sell the building. Although the continuing life of this Gray building is probably limited the memories in the minds of many college guys (and maybe even some gals) may be retained for many years.

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The Commons with Centennial Hall in the background.