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Bricks and Mortar and More

Thoren Hall

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The new Thoren Hall, the first Western Union College building, was open and ready for classes in the fall of 1901, but this was not the first higher education effort in Le Mars. In 1887, Jacob Wernli organized the Northwestern Normal School in Le Mars primarily for the training of teachers. Student housing and classes were in a downtown Le Mars location. His education effort persisted until 1891 when financial challenges ended the operation. In 1892 the Le Mars Normal School Association was organized by local businessmen to finance the continuation of the college and a new building was erected on the seven acres of land purchased at the south end of Le Mars. Finances continued to be a struggle and on April 10, 1900 at a meeting in the Union Hotel with Bishops Dubs and Stanford the property was purchased by the United Evangelical Church and the church related Western Union College came into being.

H. H. Thoren from Naperville, Illinois was hired as the first president and came to Le Mars in July of 1900 to make arrangements for the beginning of classes in September. But on the night of August 24, lightning struck the building and all of the building, equipment, and the hastily gathered library holdings were destroyed.

However, classes opened as scheduled in donated downtown buildings and immediate efforts were made to assemble funds for the construction of a new building. The three story brick Thoren Hall, with a bell in the tower, was dedicated on September 18, 1901 in preparation for classes that opened in the new building the next day.

All the academic activity was contained in this building with Commercial and Printery in the basement; Administration, classrooms and laboratories on first; spacious chapel, library, and Conservatory of Music on second; and two small meeting rooms on third.

Many Alumni will remember the various activities in Thoren as times changed. Remember the three times per week climb to the required chapel with assigned seating and professors walking the aisle to take attendance. But the same chapel space was used for outstanding drama productions —

Thoren Hall-from the 1914 Pilot Yearbook.



Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" and the Greek play Lysistrata by Aristophanes and many more. Cooperation with the Music Department produced magical musicals. The Home Ec. Department on the first floor sometimes used chickens for nutritional experiments and these were at one time moved by pranksters to some of the music practice rooms. This was not appreciated by the Home Ec. faculty. Many will remember the many hours of practice in those practice rooms. And I suspect there were some kisses exchanged in those rooms also. Art Classes, with paintings in progress, filled one of the rooms for some years.

The basement became the location of the Venetian Blind Factory in the 1940s and 50s, the Physics Department in the 60s, the College Bookstore in the 70s, and after the renovations effort in the 80s it became the Choral and Band rehearsal areas. And of course the bell and bell tower. I wonder how many climbed up to the bell tower with or without permission to ring the bell or maybe even just to leave their initials on the tower walls. Ringing the bell was discouraged but there were the ingenious ones who ran a string far out in the distance and rang the bell from afar to reduce their chances of being "captured." Thoren Hall was admitted to the National Register of Historic Places on September 15, 1978.

In 1983 a major effort was made to renovate Thoren for a Performing Arts Center. The building was gutted and the basement was successfully renovated for the Music Department. However, lack of funds for completion caused delays and the gutted building began to shift and the stately historic building was finally demolished on the Sunday morning of November 11, 1990. But there was no bell in the tower. What happened to the bell? It was an unanswered question for many but good verification by Dick Carey (class of 1952) of Des Moines tells that the bell was cracked and he and Bob Collins were hired by the college to demolish the bell and remove it from the tower. They smashed it with a sledge hammer and lowered the pieces over the edge of the roof. So they were probably the last to "ring the bell" but many memories ring on in the minds of the Alumni.

We invite your additional memories or corrections to this Thoren story and we will add your notes to the Thoren Hall Archive File.

In the November newsletter we will discuss Union Hall. Your memories and comments are welcome for inclusion in the story.