

Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

Many Ripon College buildings no longer exist

By Brendan Kile

Ripon College has been a centerpiece of the town for 173 years and has had a long and storied history.

The college was first established in January 1851, largely through funding from village leaders. The largest financial pledge was from William Brockway, from which the college got its original name, Brockway College.

The first building, East Hall, was staked out and planned in a frigid snowstorm that same winter. By 1863, construction on East Hall had finished. By 1867, two more buildings, Smith and West Halls, had been constructed and opened for college use.

These original three buildings still stand today, though used primarily for classrooms and faculty offices rather than the many mixed uses, including dorms and a food court, they used to serve in the early days of the college.

Usage has not been the only change these buildings have faced, with each having a variety of renovations or changes. East Hall received a significant renovation during 1882 and 1883, having an addition added onto the east side of the building, the cupola on top removed and the inside of the building reconfigured and remodeled.

In the last century, several major buildings were constructed, served generations of Ripon College students, and then vanished. These “missing buildings” form a series of forgotten and lost chapters of campus history, one that reveals how much Ripon College has changed and how much of it has quietly disappeared.

Of the buildings that once stood on college grounds, two left impacts on those who knew them: Memorial Gymnasium and Ingram Hall.

Memorial Gymnasium was built in 1910 and was named the “Indoor Athletic Field,” be-

ing located just south of the current Pickard Commons. It was renamed in 1951 to “Memorial Gymnasium” to commemorate the college alumni who had died in the military.

The building apparently was terrible for visiting teams to play in.

In a 2016 interview conducted by Ripon College and Video Age Productions, retired English professor Douglas Northrop recalled that the crowd was jammed in right down to the sidelines and seats were always packed, especially at basketball games. The noise during games, on top of all of that, was also described as being “enormous,” to the point that you couldn’t even hear someone yelling directly at you.

Northrop thus lovingly referred to the building as “the snake pit.”

This noise, according to former history professor Russell Blake, in that same interview, was the result of acoustic engineering conducted by former German professor and violinist Jim Hyde, which transformed what Blake described as an “old barn-like building,” into a place excellent for music. This made it a wonderful venue for concerts, so much that the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra played there every year.

Blake also noted that the building was used for intramural activities, as well as August registration, where he mentioned that the building was full of flies. There were apparently so many, according to Blake, that faculty brought fly swatters and would be whacking them as new freshmen came up to register for classes. The building was eventually torn down in the mid 1990s to make the open space on the campus today.

Yet the story of missing buildings does not end with the gym. Long before its demolition, another structure dominated campus life, the imposing and controversial Ingram Hall.



INGRAM HALL STOOD for around nearly 70 years in front of what is now Todd Wehr Hall and housed essentially all of the classes on the Ripon College campus. *submitted photo*

Ingram Hall, which was named after a wealthy lumber baron from Eau Claire, Warren H. Ingram, is another building that once stood on the campus.

Ingram Hall was constructed in 1900 and was torn down around 1968 or 1969. According to Blake, it was a “big, ugly, old, red brick building,” and was described as a horrible building by anyone who was familiar with it.

It was torn down after around 70 years of usage, which was a relatively short amount of time. This was primarily due to its original shoddy construction, as well as the subsequently minimal and poor repair jobs.

Ingram Hall was the “single most important building to be torn down at the college,” according to Northrop, as everything was there. At the time, essentially all classes, including some physical education classes, were held in Ingram Hall, making tearing it down a monumental decision on behalf of the college.

Northrop further described the building as having been only “sort of” taken down in the beginning, with only a third of it removed while Todd Wehr Hall was under construction, which was encroaching on its space.



MEMORIAL GYMNASIUM WAS built in 1910 and was torn down in the mid-1990s. It was located just south of the current Pickard Commons. *submitted photo*

Northrop recounted a story of how former professor William “Bill” Martz was teaching an English class in the undemolished two-thirds of the building when an I-beam came in through the wall due to mismeasurements made by construction crews. By 1969, the building was gone; the space in front and south of Todd Wehr, where it once stood, is standing empty to this day, with nothing but a sidewalk running through it.

Ingram Hall and Memorial Hall are reminders of how much things change. Today’s campus is only the most recent version of Ripon College in a long line of preceding spaces. Beneath the familiar campus of the 21st century lies a land-

scape that has been built, rebuilt and reshaped for generations, leaving behind little besides the past ghosts of structures that once defined campus life.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.

Editors note: This is the third of three Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society. Kile is a senior.



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