

The Burning of Nichols Gymnasium

By: Rachael Schwanebeck

Introduction

Nichols Gymnasium was built in 1901 at the bequest of J. L. Nichols; a former instructor of the college. The gymnasium was the second building to be built on campus and was a first for universities as many did not have such a building. It was located between what is now Goldspohn Hall and Oesterle Library but the original space is currently a parking lot. In February of 1929, the college bid a fond farewell to its beloved gymnasium due to a destructive fire. Before the community even had a proper chance to recover from this loss, President Rall had plans for a new addition to the Field House instead of a proper rebuild. In this time, Rall already had contributions towards the completion of a new gym from multiple people which amassed to around \$150,000 in total.

The Rebuilding Project

Originally, the costs of the additions to the Field House in place of repairing Nichols was set at around \$300,000.00. Not long after the fire itself, Annie, Gustavus, and Henry Pfeiffer pledged around \$150,000 towards the project. The plan to make up the other half of the projects funds was to split costs among the student body along with groups that can fundraise. The project was pressing to raise the extra \$150,000 with just 30 days. Quickly following this knowledge, it was made known by the architects that the overall costs for the building would likely be closer to \$270,000. The amount to be raised by the community was set around \$40,000.



The Aftermath

The student body of the college was very mixed about the situation surrounding Nichols Gym. Many of the athletic students were heartbroken by the news. For many, Nichols was similar to a second home. The NCC Basketball team found out after an out-of-state meet that their home gym was now gone. Some other students found the spending amount on the athletic new building ludicrous. They believed that not as much was needed, and that more money should go to other programs. Other students used the event to make light-hearted jokes like “it takes the gym burning down to get some kids to church” due to the use of the church's basement as a pseudo gym. Even still, many would share in the idea that they were not given enough time to recover from the sudden loss.

Donators	Pfeifer Family	Pledges	Borrowing	Community (estimate)
Money Raised (in Thousands)	\$150	\$55	\$50	\$40

February 23rd, 1929

In the early morning of February 23rd, the wail of the fire alarm was heard across campus. At around 5 o'clock in the morning, a fire of unknown origins completely engulfed the Nichols Gym. Though portions of the outward walls were brick, the original interior of the building was almost completely wood. The fire was believed to have started in the basement of the gymnasium. The fires by the time the fire was noticed, and the alarms were sound, was so big that the heat and the smoke made the building impossible to enter to attempt to extinguish. After battling the raging flames for a few hours, attention was turned to the surrounding, highly flammable buildings which were saved. In the end, the fire decimated the old Nichols Gymnasium. It was described in the NCC Alumni News as “The four brick walls in-closed a raging furnace that was beautiful to behold but hard on the building”. Talk quickly moved to talking about a new building entirely. The hope became to raise around \$300,000.00 for a more modern field house instead of a rebuild effort.

“From Two-Story Frame Building to Extended Campus” *North Central College Alumni News*, March 1986, 9, North Central College Archive.
“North Central College Gym Completely Destroyed by Fire February 23rd” *North Central College Alumni News*, March 1929, 1, North Central College Archive.
North Central Chronicle, January 14, 1930, 5, North Central College Archive.
Spectrum. 1929. Naperville, IL: North Central College, 1929, 128, 175, North Central College Archive.
“Trustees Authorize Building of Gymnasium and Field House” *North Central College Alumni News*, January 1930, 2, North Central College Archive.