



Darby Gymnasium

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Type of design and construction - Art Deco design, walls of brick with limestone belts and accents, slab on grade except for the south 1/3 which was excavated to provide basement space, wooden trussed (lamellar) vaulted roof

Gross Sq. Ft. - 29,168 - Net Sq. Ft. - 26,104 - Outside dimensions of gymnasium building- 160 ft. X 120 ft.

Date of completion of construction - August 1942

Initial Cost - \$125,000

Architect - Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks & Borg, Des Moines

General Contractor - Rudolph Weitz Construction, Des Moines

Initial Functions – Darby was initially constructed to serve as a men's gymnasium and all-college auditorium facility

Major renovations-

Dates - 1976, 1977 & 1980

Cost - \$15,000 - \$35,000 each which was funded from Current Fund Budget

Architect - Gene O'Neil of Woodburn & O'Neil, Des Moines

Subsequent function – Darby serves as the gymnasium for men's and women's basketball and the location of the Noyce Computer Center (including all central processing equipment and staff offices). The structure continues to serve as the large auditorium facility for the College.

Comments -

Darby Gymnasium (including Noyce Computer Center) is the only example of art deco architectural design on Grinnell's campus. A number of contemporary architects have declared that they believe it to be one of the College's more distinctive buildings because of its unique representation of this type of architecture on campus.

The building is also distinguished because of its distinctive roof structure. The architects originally designed a steel-trussed roof. However, as a result of a shortage of steel during 1941 brought on by the war in Europe, they redesigned the roof with wooden supports in what is known as a Philippine truss or lamellar system. The basic member of the support consists of 2" X

10" X 8' timbers bolted together in a diamond shape and interconnected to others of the same type to support the vaulted roof. Seven sets of two steel tie-rod supports each were tied into the walls to provide added support for the walls and to help contain the roof structure. These tie-rods span the entire structure from side to side running from east to west twenty-four ft. above the floor to allow unhindered overhead space for basketball shots.

Much-needed acoustic improvement was added to the building in 1987 by the installation of acoustic batting material that divided longitudinally each diamond of the lamellar structure throughout the roof. Several visiting architects have asked to see this distinctive roof design.

The basketball court was planned to be 100 ft. X 70 ft. but was ultimately designed to measure 96 ft. X 70 ft. with two cross-courts marked off and with baskets for each to provide more practice space than would be available by only using the full-court. The gymnasium floor was covered with very high quality hard maple while the locker rooms and office floors were originally finished in smooth surfaced concrete. Plans originally included space for bowling alleys in the basement space at the south end of the building. However, the bowling alleys were never constructed. Seating for spectators was provided through the design of tiers of three permanent rows of seats below which state of the art folding bleachers were installed. The folded bleachers were rolled to east and west walls to within approximately four feet of the walls when the reduced east-west courts were used for practice sessions. As originally configured the gymnasium was designed to seat 1,700 spectators for basketball games. When used as an auditorium it would seat an audience of well over 2,500 with folding chairs covering the playing area of the floor. At the time it was designed, it was considered to be one of the outstanding gymnasium facilities in the Midwest.

The south 1/3 of the building, which was excavated below ground level, provided a basement-level area. Over the years the basement level has provided space for widely varied activities ranging from use as a wrestling room, to an ROTC rifle target range, to an archery range, to student housing, to the present craft shops area managed by student affairs personnel. Physical education faculty offices were originally located in the southeast and southwest corners of the building on both the first and second floors. Between the offices and above the center of the basement area concrete terraces were constructed which supported wooden bleacher seats and which provided an addition to the seating capacity for all events held in Darby.

The interiors of both the gymnasium and the other areas of the building were finished in Tan-colored glazed tile to the four-ft. level and unglazed, rough-finished tile above that. After several years, the unglazed tile was ultimately painted throughout the entire building. Several locker rooms containing 21 showers, lockers and an equipment service area were located in a one story wing running the full length of the building on its west wall and which extended approximately 20 ft. beyond the north wall of the gymnasium proper.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for Darby were held at Commencement, June 7, 1941. The building was completed enough to be ready for use in Commencement activities in June, 1942 but the final completion was not accomplished until the fall of 1942. Darby was used by the men's basketball team at the beginning of the 1942-43 season. Construction on Darby

was slowed greatly by a lack of metals, due to their use in the war effort. This primarily affected the availability of plumbing and electrical materials.

The largest contributor to funds for the construction of Darby and the person after whom the building was named, Fred Darby, class of 1895, was a long-time Trustee of the College. He had made a significant fortune in the oil business after graduating from Grinnell and was a very generous contributor to the College.

In the years during World War II, men from the U. S. military programs located at the College used Darby Gymnasium a great deal. For many years use of the gymnasium has been offered to persons from the Grinnell community and many members of the community have enjoyed the use of the facility.

In the 1960s the student radio station was moved to the northwest corner of the second level of Darby and has continued to broadcast from there to the present time.

The completion of the College's new Physical Education Complex in 1971 resulted in moving all of the offices of the staff of the Department of Physical Education to the new building. However, the high quality of the hardwood playing surface in Darby and the excellent facilities for spectators resulted in the decision to continue to use it for all varsity basketball needs as well as for a few other sports, such as volleyball.

In 1975-76 the College's computer center was moved from an office building on 5th Ave. between Main and Broad Streets to the southwest corner of Darby in which it occupied three of the locker room areas. A new, free standing central processing computer (DEC PDP 1145) was installed in the northernmost space of the three locker rooms with staff offices occupying the southernmost space.

In 1977 the second renovation of Darby occurred when the area above the concrete terraced area was renovated to provide temporary office space for the members of the Office of Development. When the Office of Development moved to their new facility in Macy House several months later, the temporary space was converted into more permanent space to house computer center offices, a conference room and a classroom. These modifications resulted in a reduction in the basketball spectator seating capacity to approximately 1,400 and the seating capacity as an auditorium to approximately 2,000.

In 1979, after the departure of the Office of Development, the space occupied by Grinnell College Computer Services was expanded to fill the space vacated by development. The entire south 1/4 of the upper two floors as well as two locker rooms were occupied by GCCS. With the second and, ultimately, the third renovation of the Grinnell College Computer Services space the offices were significantly improved. Two computer laboratories were designed and constructed for use by students and staff. At the present time (1997), the twenty-three-person Computer Services Staff has offices in this area.

During the 1987-88 academic year, the Grinnell College Computer Center was re-named The Noyce Computer Center in honor of Robert Noyce, Class of '49, long-time Trustee and co-inventor of the microchip which made modern computing possible. Noyce was also a major financial contributor to the purchase of Grinnell's first three pieces of computer central processing equipment.

In 1992 and 1993 pathways of access and egress to the building were modified to come into compliance with the Fire Safety Code and the American Disabilities Act. In 1996 a new floor was installed. The floor that it replaced had been in place for over 50 years. In 1996, the College's telephone switch-gear was moved from the Heating Plant Building to Darby, since the College's telephone service was under the supervision of Grinnell College Computer Services.

Anecdotes concerning Darby Gymnasium are legion. The following represent a few of those anecdotes: several men's and women's conference basketball championships being fought out on its basketball court, alarm clocks being hidden within the roof structure and set to go off during a major speech by Congressman Judd, another time the American flag unfurled from the rafters before a basketball game and was decorated with a large poster on which was printed "Hank Brown Eats It" (Brown was Dean of Men). The College dismissed three men for perpetrating this prank. Another prank involved removal of a very expensive painting (on loan from a renowned museum) of an aged woman from Burling Library. The pranksters hung the painting from the torch which decorates the south facade of Darby with a sign attached which read "Big Mother Is Watching You." No one was apprehended in relation to this prank. Many remember a much-touted wrestling match between a 1971 graduate and a trained bear. One could continue with listing such anecdotes longer than I care to.

Darby has served as a wonderful facility for the College and its students for well over 50 years and has certainly been worth every penny of the \$125,000 that it cost initially to construct it. For over thirty years, Darby Gymnasium served as the focal center for the entire men's intercollegiate athletic program and physical education activities. For over fifty years it has continued to be the site of all intercollegiate basketball activities at the College. Since 1975 it has served well as the Grinnell College Computer Services (Noyce) nerve center. Until the advent of Harris Center in 1991 it served as the site for such all-college functions as student registration, alumni functions, mock elections, and many other functions too numerous to mention here. Today, when a major college activity which will draw more than six to eight hundred spectators is planned, Darby is called upon to provide the large community space which the College lacks in all of its other facilities. Many of the College's major large-crowd entertainment events are still held in Darby Gymnasium. In inclement weather, commencement has always been held in Darby.

Many generations of Grinnellians remember Darby as the place where they saw Martin Luther King Jr., Ted Kennedy, Roger Bannister, The Harlem Globe Trotters, Stan Kenton, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Bruce Springsteen, Chick Corea or, of course, the College's own Herbie Hancock and many other dignitaries and entertainers too numerous to mention here. Darby Gymnasium is truly great old building of the College that is filled with memories for most of the college's post 1941 alumni, faculty members and friends of the College.

Waldo Walker
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