The Fires of Luther College, by Mary Hull Mohr

First-time visitors to the Luther campus for one of its sesquicentennial celebrations might ask why they see no 19th century Main Building. The answer would be “Fire.” Over its 150-year history, Luther has experienced and survived the destruction by fire of two 19th century Main Buildings, as well as the early 20th century Preus gymnasium.

On May 19, 1889, fire destroyed the first Main Building. Dedicated on October 14 (Founders Day) in 1865, it was the college: classrooms, dormitory, dining facilities, and chapel, as well as housing for President Laur. Larsen and Campus Pastor Nils Brandt and their families, were within its walls. After the fire, seniors stayed to graduate, but all other students went home, to return in the fall to a variety of community spaces, including the basement of First Lutheran Church and the Arlington Hotel (now Vesterheim).

Financial pressures led to serious discussions in July about moving the college to St. Paul. However, no agreement on a contract could be reached. Pastor Koren’s successful fundraising over the summer resulted in the decision in September 1989 to rebuild on site. Amazingly, the beautiful second Main was dedicated on October 14, 1890.

The next major fire was equally devastating. On May 31, 1942, lightning struck, and Main burned to the ground in a matter of hours. Although the Decorah fire department was joined by four neighboring departments, they were too late. Volunteers, students, and faculty did succeed in removing biological equipment, college records, and furniture.

Old Main was not replaced for ten years, one reason being the existence of the C.K. Preus Gymnasium. Dedicated in 1926, it served as more than a gym. A setting for daily required chapel and rehearsal and performance space for plays and concerts, the gym was the social center of Luther. New Main (dedicated in 1952) was a functional classroom and office building. Not only did it not duplicate all of the uses of the original Main buildings, its simple lines gave a different look to the entire campus.

Then, again, on November 2, 1961, the campus was thrown into a state of shock when a third fire destroyed the Preus Gymnasium. Starting in the western part of the building, the fire quickly spread throughout the structure. On the following morning only part of the tower remained. Its loss can be measured by the fact that two buildings were built to replace it: the Field House in 1964 and the Center for Faith and Life in 1977.

Each of the three fires has contributed in its own way to the modern look of Luther’s campus. That the college survived these tragedies testifies to the leadership, adaptability, and generosity of the many people who labored to “rebuild” Luther College.