The Roaring Twenties at Luther College, by Wilfred F. Bunge

The world greeted the 1920s in a mood of robust hope—the weariness of war past, the future open. Midwestern Norwegian Lutherans shared the expectation of change and growth. David Nelson in his centennial history of Luther College labels the time the beginning of the modern era in the college’s history, its transition to a genuinely American college. English had completely replaced Norwegian as the language of instruction, and the curriculum, though still centered on the classical course, had a growing range of electives and concentrations.

Koren Library was under construction, and President Preus named Karl Jacobsen the college’s first full-time professional librarian. With considerable experience at the Library of Congress and the University of Chicago, Jacobsen prepared for the move to the new library, a major resource for the educational program of the college. He reclassified the collection with the Library of Congress system, a far-sighted and fortunate decision.

On May 28, 1921, Preus died of a heart attack and Oscar Olson, professor of English since 1901, succeeded him as president. Koren Library was ready for dedication on October 14, Founders’ Day 1921, part of a festive 60th anniversary celebration. During that year the faculty prepared an encyclopedic record of the college, Luther College Through Sixty Years, 1861 – 1921.

Olson included a progressive vision for the college in that publication—a building program and plans to increase enrollment and build the faculty. The first project was to be a gymnasium, to serve also as an auditorium for plays, concerts, lectures, and daily chapel. Together with Decorah architect Charles Altfillisch he visited other gymnasiums and developed plans for Preus Gymnasium, completed in 1926.

The appointment of Knut Gjerset as curator of the college museum in 1922 signaled major development of that collection, with spacious exhibit space on the ground floor of Koren Library. Further, a radio broadcasting license with the call letters KWLC enabled a college radio station, opened on December 18, 1926 with a reading of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address by President Olson.

Olson attended to the development of the campus. In addition to regular mowing of the campus green, he authorized moving the football field from the central campus to a cleared area to the northeast, Nustad Field, ready in 1931. In January 1929, just a squeak prior to the greatest economic collapse in the history of the nation, Olson championed the purchase of the Jewell farm—360 acres adjacent to the campus to the east, west, and north.

With the onset of the Great Depression, the 1920s ended with a collective sigh. It was a setback at Luther College, but not the last word.