The Diamond Jubilee of Luther College
By Wilfred F. Bunge

Midway through the 150 years of Luther College, the year 1936 was a pivotal point in its history. The tag for 75 years is Diamond Jubilee. In the case of Luther College it was an occasion to enshrine the past in stone and improve its financial position, with women as full partners in the enterprise.

The optimism of the 1920s had led to significant investments for the future of the college—the building of Preus Gymnasium and the purchase of the Jewell farm. When the world economy tanked in 1929, major indebtedness remained on both projects. The challenge of the early 1930s was institutional survival. Enrollment fell, there were faculty layoffs, financial support declined to a dribble, and the supporting church was considering closing or merging some of it schools.

Such a crisis could lead either to surrender or counterattack. The Luther College community chose a determined struggle for survival. In August 1934, prodded by the Alumni Association, President Preus met with a group of alumni and other supporters of the college to form a 75th anniversary committee. Its duties were to plan the Diamond Jubilee celebration and direct a fund-raising program. The goal was to put the college on a sound financial footing by Homecoming 1936. David T. Nelson, professor of English, served as secretary of the committee and has left us a detailed record of the Diamond Jubilee Chest campaign.

The anniversary provided an opportunity to recall and honor the past of the college. The alumni had in 1933 funded a memorial to honor Laur. Larsen on the centennial of his birth. Designed and constructed by Tarkjel Landsverk and situated on the slope southeast of Koren Library, the monument consists of a low relief image of Larsen in bronze fixed to a large boulder surrounded with honeycomb limestone. For the Diamond Jubilee Landsverk added the Pioneer Memorial just above the Larsen monument and harmonious with it in design—a stone wall with bronze plaques honoring the founders and founding congregations of the college.

The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America approved coeducation for Luther in the summer of 1936, the end result of complex negotiations. From June 5 until September 5 the Concert Band toured the United States and Norway. The Jubilee culminated in a splendid October Homecoming week, with upwards of 10,000 visitors. It included the dedication of the Pioneer Memorial and the announcement of a successful Diamond Jubilee Chest (approximately $52,000 raised). The celebration sparkled with Luther College diamonds—alumni from 60 of the 69 classes of graduates, lots of music, and theological rhetoric aplenty.