Decorah Newspaper Essays

Essay #3: The Journey to Luther’s First Main Building, by Mary Hull Mohr

In their first year (1861-1862) Luther College faculty and students lived and studied in the Wisconsin Halfway Creek parsonage. When a pastor arrived to occupy that parsonage in the summer of 1862, Luther College was on the road again. They packed college property and the professors’ belongings in ten lumber wagons for the journey to LaCrosse where they boarded a river boat to Lansing.

They reached Decorah on July 31. Since there was still no building on the 32 acre site which the Synod had purchased in West Decorah, Laur. Larsen, his family, and 34 students moved into the Otis building at the corner of Main and Winnebago. The Court House across the street provided worship space for the college and the Lutheran Church of Decorah. The college purchased the Griswold House on the northeast corner of Center Street and Leiv Eiriksson Drive for Professor Schmidt, the second teacher, and his family.

When enrollment continued to increase, the college hired two new teachers for the 1863-64 year and constructed a smaller brick building, “fondly” called Hututu by the students, west of the Otis Building. Early in 1863 the college let a contract for 1,800,000 bricks to be made from clay found on the college site and construction work commenced. The cornerstone ceremony took place on June 30, 1864.

On October 10, 1865, with the north wing and central section of the building near completion (south wing added in 1874), 81 students moved in. There were apartments for the steward, Laur. Larsen, Nils Brandt (campus and Decorah congregation pastor), and their families. On the site were two other buildings, a bakery and a stable later renovated for use as a dormitory and soon called the “Chicken Coop.”

It was a joyous day on October 14, 1865, Founder’s Day, for the estimated assembly of 6000 who gathered for the dedication of Main Building. Dignitaries from the church and the community, faculty, students, and numerous visitors marched from the Court House to the college campus to stand before the new building. H.A. Preus, president of the Norwegian Synod, gave the dedicatory address. After other speeches, the dedication ceremony, and the singing of hymns, between 1500 and 2000 people retired to the rear of the building where dinner was served.

In the evening the departing visitors looked back at Main to see “Soli Deo Gloria” illuminated in the windows by candles. The first leg of the journey was complete. The faith of the people, the vision of their leaders, and numerous gifts from fields and flocks had resulted in a permanent home for this first Norwegian Lutheran College.