

CREW HOUSE



Fig. 1. The crew house, c. 1975 center, Adams Hall at left, Jorns Hall at right. The 1985 addition to the crew house is at the right of the building. This photo comes from the back of the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Rowing brochure. [photo courtesy of UW athletic department]

The Crew house was built in 1966 to replace quarters behind the red gym, lost to the construction of the Alumni House. The site was originally at Willows Beach but was changed to the Babcock Drive site after objections by the city of Madison. The crew house was expanded in 1985 and may again become too small for the program.

There was no doubt that a new crew-house was needed. The one in back of old red gym was more than seventy years old, and was a wood-frame structure built with donated funds, and had seen very heavy use by both University students and the local public. Besides, it was due to be demolished to make way for the alumni house. In September 1963 the regents approved a plan to build a new boathouse with \$250,000 of athletic departments revolving funds. The regents had decided to build at the Willows Beach, a small (85 feet) piece of Mendota lakeshore directly north of the Elm Drive dorms. In November 1963 the state approved the construction of a crew house to be financed from athletic receipts and gifts.¹

This building was to contain not only varsity and intramural crew equipment, but student

recreational swimming facilities. This plan seemed to be on the fast track, with funding, location, and design all selected and agreed to. Haste was needed since the plans for the alumni house were nearly ready, and they called for the removal of the old boat-house. In January 1965 the regents examined the preliminary plans for the crew house developed by architect John J. Flad. By this time the recreational facilities had been deleted and public toilets added.²

At this regents meeting were Mrs. Richard Bardwell, Mrs. Milton Leidner, and Mr. Kenton Peters, representatives of the Capitol Community Citizens, Madison alderman Goulette, and Alicia Ashman of the league of Women Voters. They had serious objections to the plan for the crew house. In forty five minutes of presentation, they made several points about the crew house: any construction on the beach would detract from the environment; it would destroy the only beach available on the west side of Madison; the development would benefit only a handful of athletes, while depriving thousands of residents. The representatives displayed a petition against the project signed by 4000 residents, including many "signatures" that consisted of children's thumb-prints.

They pointed out that the Madison Common Council had passed a resolution that development at the Willows should be jointly studied by the regents and the City of Madison. When the regents asked Mrs. Leidner if she would object to the construction of a bath house on the site, she replied in the negative. A motion to restudy the plan and report at the next regent's meeting was voted down, 6-3. President Debardeleben and regent Cohen agreed that from the nature of the presentations there did not appear to be any room for compromise.³

Over the next few weeks this controversy raged back and forth. The regents resisted arguments that they did not have final authority over campus development. In vain the planners argued that the project would actually expand the beach, its public access and parking, and would be unavailable to the public for only short periods of crew use in the spring and fall months, and that five other sites had been examined before deciding on the Willows. The citizens followed the usual course of writing campaigns to the newspapers, and insisting that the city have joint authority over the project with the regents. The president of the City Employees Local 236 wrote a letter to president Harrington, and Madison newspapers, arguing that the cost of the crew house was too high, and that the Willows should remain "unmolested". Professor Roger Schwenn reversed his opposition to the plan because of "blind opposition, political gimmickry, obfuscation, and sappy sentimentalism abroad in Madison" and apologized to Harrington. The city registered its disapproval with the state building commission.⁴

By early March, 1965 the wrangling was beginning to tell on the University, president Harrington began to back away from support of the site, writing the new chancellor Robin Fleming that "we should look at new sites", while insisting that "we are not joining the Park Commission in looking at new sites, we absolutely must retain our full right to do these things ourselves." Harrington also insists that the University has not promised to keep Willows Beach open or to improve it at all. Fleming opined that the University should not take a major stand on the case even though it might "encourage citizen groups to attack us". Late in March the University informed the Madison Parks Department that they would welcome a commissioner to consult with the University on a new site, while insisting that the ultimate decision must remain with the regents. In March the regents decided to send the question back to the planning Committee.⁵

In October, 1965 a new study of sites for the crew house was made and recommended a site at the end of Babcock Drive. The regents approved the new site in their December 1965 meeting. Regent Greenquist smelled capitulation, and asked repeatedly if the new site was as good as the old one, or if it was being selected "just to keep peace with the city". Fleming replied that the site was entirely acceptable to the University. The controversy was over.⁶

By June 1966 Flad had altered the plans for the crew-house to fit the new site, and in July the regents approved the preliminary plans, with an estimated cost of \$250,000. In November 1966 the

Executive Committee awarded contracts for the crew-house. The general contractor was General Lumber and Improvement Company of Madison for \$170,300. Total contracts were for \$280,000. The funds came from the athletic department (\$207,000), gift funds (\$43,000), and state funds for utilities (\$30,000). Construction began November 8, 1966. Construction was 85 per cent complete, in June 1967, when work was stopped by a labor strike. About six weeks of work remained after the strike and the crew house was ready in the fall of 1967.⁷

The crew-house is a single story concrete building, 110 feet square, set deep into the lakeshore, with a sun deck on the roof, at street level. It contains storage for shells, a rowing tank, staff offices, a shop, and exercise equipment. The addition of women's crew to intercollegiate status in 1974, has more than doubled the number of athletes using the facilities, and even with another storage bay added in 1985, the building is overcrowded. Plans are being made to build a new crew-house, or expand the existing one. The Willows Beach is again being considered as a crew site. The objection this time is based on the possibility of disturbing an old anthrax disease pit. Current public use of the Willows is essentially zero, as is the use of its putative replacement, the beach and beach house on the north side of Picnic Point.⁸

- 1) *Regent's Minutes*, September 6, 1963, November 8, 1963, December 3, 1963; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, December 1963 p. 8; As early as July 1964, there was resistance to the use of Willows beach: the Madison board of Park Commissioners recommended to the Mayor and common council that the Willows be designated a permanent public beach, Marshall to Harrington, July 9, 1964 series 24/9/3 box 5.
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, January 8, 1965; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February 1965, p. 8; Peterson to Wisconsin State Building Commission, January 11, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 21.
- 3) *Regent's Minutes*, January 8, 1965;
- 4) Yanke to Harrington, February 17, 1965, Schwenn to Harrington, January 14, 1965, Harrington to Schwenn, January 26, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 21. Facts Concerning the Willows Beach, February 5, 1965, series 24/9/3 box 5.
- 5) Harrington to Fleming, March 3, 1965, Fleming to Harrington and Clodius, February 25, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 21; *Regent's Minutes*, March 5, 1965.
- 6) Memo Concerning Location for New Crew Facilities, October 25, 1965, series 24/9/3 box 5; *Regent's Minutes*, December 10, 1965.
- 7) *Regent's Minutes*, July 13, 1966, November 4, 1966, exhibit D; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, January 1966, p. 18; Budget, Timetable, Space Summary and Outline Specifications, John J. Flad and Co., June 27, 1966. Halle to Tipple, April 28, 1967, series 24/9/3 box 8.
- 8) *Regent's Minutes*, March 8, 1985; Capital Times, November 15, 1994; Wisconsin Intercollegiate Rowing 1993-1994 Catalog (Athletic Department offices).