

FIELD HOUSE



Fig. 1. The Field House from the southwest, c. 1932. [Series 9/11, jf-53]

The field house was the project of athletic director George Little. It was begun in 1929, first used in 1930 and has been used for basketball and large community gatherings such as convocations and concerts, ever since. The second level seating was added in 1936 and a major remodelling took place in 1974. Because of limited size and fire danger, a new field house (the Kohl Center) was begun in 1996.

When George Little took the job as athletic director at the University of Wisconsin in 1925, he also became the football coach. Little had been an assistant of Michigan's famous Fielding Yost. Yost gave Little a glowing recommendation to J. F. A. "Sunny" Pyre, the ex-football star and faculty chairman of the athletic council.

Little acted as coach for two years, before hiring coach Glenn Thistlethwaite away from Northwestern, and turning strictly to administrative work. A hardworking and persuasive man, Little had a vision for the athletic facilities at the University. By 1927 he had developed a three million-dollar master plan for athletic facilities, including replacements for the armory, the gymnasium annex, and the boathouse.¹ His support for this enormous project was considerable. The legislature of 1927 approved an appropriation of \$350,000 to begin the project. Because of economic hardship, this bill was pocket vetoed by Governor Zimmerman. Rather than pursue this avenue of funding, Little turned to the regents. His plans had now shrunk considerably. He now asked only for \$350,000 for a field house without facilities for non-income-producing sports.

Football was well provided for at the Camp Randall stadium; the real problem was with basketball. Wisconsin played basketball in the old red gym. The gym was built in 1892, and for basketball games held 2240 spectators. It was called "the little cigar box gym" by newspapermen, and complaints were heard about scalping of the scarce tickets. In the fall of 1927, in an interview with a



Fig. 2. 1930, the field house is born into the west campus. The steel framework rises to the south of the stadium. Breese Terrace (with trolley cars) is at the left. The recently completed Van Hise dorms and Lake Mendota are in the far background. Note that the engineering campus is almost entirely undeveloped, only the old forest products lab, and the "old sawtooth" engineering lab building (which within two years would be the site of mechanical engineering) are shown. [Series 9/11, M111]

Chicago paper, basketball coach Walter "Doc" Meanwell either did (the *Chicago Tribune*) or did not (Meanwell) call the gym a "foul-smelling rat trap".² A new field house became Little's main priority. The regents had been discussing a field house since 1925, and had decided to locate the field house at the south end of the stadium³.

The regents were persuaded by Little to fund the field house through the University Building Corporation, the dummy corporation that had recently been used to fund the Van Hise dorms, and the furnishings of the Memorial Union. The regents approved a loan of \$350,000 at 4.5 percent for thirty years.⁴

By this time State Architect Arthur Peabody in consultation with architect Paul Cret, had produced plans for the field house which were approved by the regents on March 6, 1929. This building clearly showed the techniques that Peabody and his staff had learned from architects Laird and Cret twenty years before. The Italian Renaissance style is similar to, though much less formal than, Laird and Cret's Lathrop Hall design. The deep reveals around the enormous round-headed windows, the decorative use of Bedford limestone and terra cotta trim, the recessed panels suggesting columns, and other details show the influence of Peabody's associate Cret. As an interesting detail, the large "W" symbols on the north and south faces of the building were apparently not the work of either Peabody or Cret. The original plans have a note to bidding contractors to "submit model" for this decoration. Presumably some unknown designer at the winning contractor's office did the design, arguably the most beautiful University symbol on any UW building.

Bids were opened June 22, 1929, and all bids were rejected. There were two problems: first, the regents specified that the building be completed by December 11, 1929, which no bidder would guarantee; and second, the regents specified that any arbitration would be decided by them alone, to which no bidder would agree. The regents capitulated on both points. By late September they had signed contracts with Quinn Construction Company of Madison for the excavations and foundations, and with William Christenson of Racine for general contracting for the building. Completion was set for basketball season 1931.

Ground was broken on September 26, 1929 by the Quinn company. It was believed that the

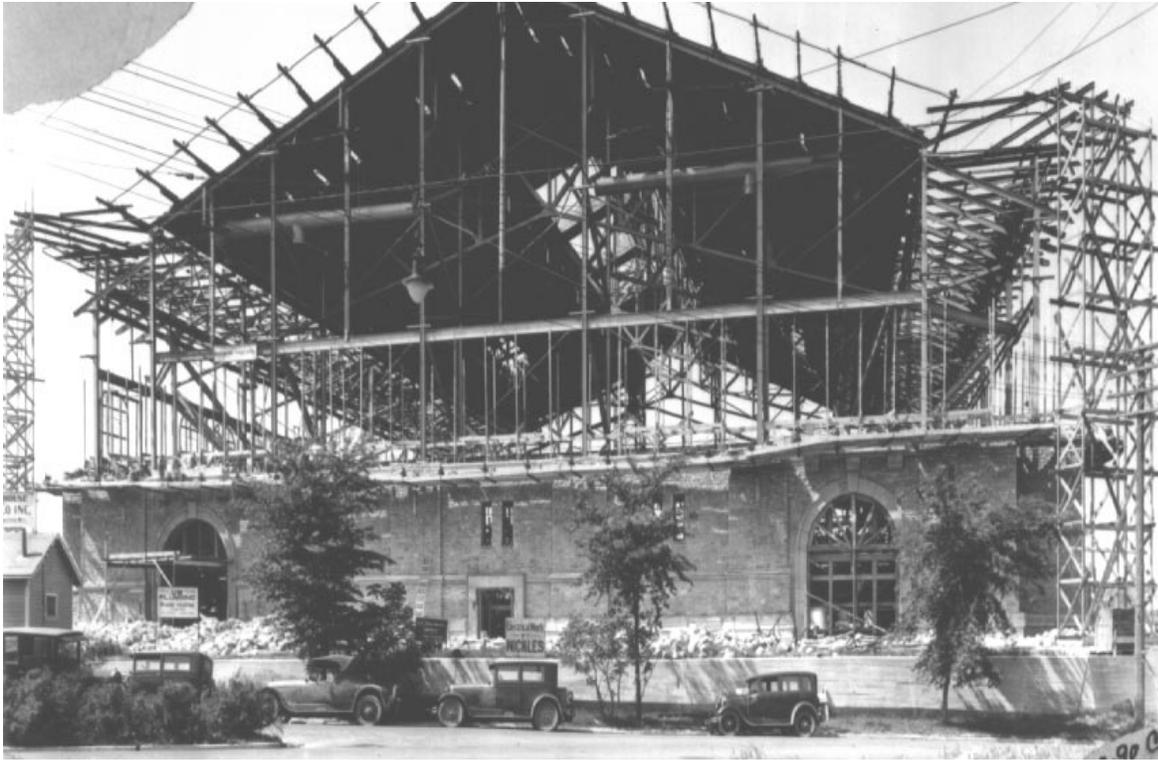


Fig. 3. 1929: the field house under construction from the Monroe Street side.

building would be ready for use by the fall of 1930. The cost was estimated at \$453,756, of which \$51,000 would be repaid from athletic receipts, \$5000 per year for ten years. By November 16, the Cardinal reported that the field house was one-third done. All steel was in place by March 30, 1930. Work progressed rapidly and smoothly throughout 1930, and the building was dedicated December 18, 1930, with a win by Walter "Doc" Meanwell's Badgers, who by means of the "famous short passing system" defeated Pennsylvania by the score of 27-12, before a sellout crowd of 8600.⁵

The building was 240 feet by 200 feet. It had a dirt floor, with a one-eighth mile cinder track. Two portable basketball floors were used for practice, though they were replaced by one large one for "regulation" play. The building was large enough to play baseball and football in when weather-proof conditions were needed. Track and field events were also accommodated. Because it was originally intended that the field house be connected by tunnel to the locker rooms and facilities under the stadium, no such facilities were included in the field house itself. After the building was complete it was found that a gathering place of this size had been needed for some time. Graduation ceremonies and other large gatherings of that sort, which had begun to overflow the Stock Pavilion were moved to the field house.

The walls were of concrete and faced with Madison sandstone rubble work, a style that had been used with good results on the Van Hise dormitories a few years earlier. Because the Madison stone quarries to the west of the city (from which had come the facing stone for most of the best buildings on the older parts of the campus) were nearly played out, this uncoursed rubble was all that was available. Peabody was determined that the field house have a texture and color consistent with

the rest of the campus, in which he succeeded very well. It is unfortunate that his plan to sheath the adjoining stadium with this rubble stone style was never carried out.

All reviews of the new facility were favorable. For several years, the only complaints heard were that there were too few seats and that the huge brassribbed skylights dripped condensation on the basketball court. As a cost saving measure, the field house had been built without the second balcony. This additional seating was soon needed. It was planned by September 1936 and funded by a new loan and a Public Works Administration grant, for a total of \$55,500. The regents hired contractor George Nelson of Madison and by January 8, 1936 (the same day University President Glenn Frank was ousted by the regents), the second balcony was finished, bringing the total seating to 12,000. In 1940, the offending skylights were removed and the building reroofed.

In the fall of 1974 a remodelling by Potter, Lawson and Pawlowski, built permanent lower level bleachers, dressing rooms and concession areas below the bleachers, installed a permanent floor, and cosmetically refurbished the building. This \$671,000 remodelling was partly the result of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) threat to find another site for the heavily attended (and profitable) annual state wrestling and basketball tournaments. This renovation, which cost more than the original construction, alleviated the threat by the WIAA.

Now in 1994, with the recently rejuvenated Badger basketball program, familiar complaints are being heard. There aren't enough seats for the games; scalpers are thriving; there are too few exits in case of a fire emergency. Since a thorough rebuilding of the field house would cost millions, the current plan is to build a new field house (to be known as the Kohl center) to the east of the southeast dormitories, which will accommodate basketball and hockey. The old building will most likely be used for minor and intramural sports.

1) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1928, p. 39.

2) *Daily Cardinal*, November 9, 1927, p. 1.

3) The regents decided on January 20, 1926 to put the field house at Breese and University. But after a petition from the neighborhood, they moved it to the stadium site (regent's minutes, December 8, 1926).

4) Papers of the Board of Regents, March 7, 1928, and the *Daily Cardinal* March 31, 1928 p. 3

5) *Daily Cardinal*, December 19, 1930, p. 1.