

# LOWELL HALL



Fig. 1. Lowell Hall February 1997. The stem of the 'T and the right half of the crossbar are the original building. The left crossbar is the 1966 addition. [Del Brown Photo, AP-66]

*In 1970 the University purchased Lowell Hall, a private dormitory built in 1960. It was intended to provide housing and meeting rooms for the undersized Wisconsin Center. A question about the appraisal of Lowell Hall cause a short-lived scandal, during which no wrong doing was found. The building now functions as guest rooms and a convention center for the UW extension program.*

When the Wisconsin Center was built in 1957, the design was stripped of its guest rooms and many large conference rooms because of funding limitations. Through the late 1960s, the increasingly successful extension programs used local hotels as guest rooms, and rented or improvised conference space. Finally in 1969 the state legislature approved an appropriation of \$2.7 million for the construction of an extension guest house. Two main plans were considered, the demolition of the red gym, and the construction on agricultural land west of campus. Neither of these plans were particularly popular, but the high cost of real estate in the campus area made alternatives difficult to find.

Then in the fall of 1969 president Fred Harvey Harrington was approached by Robert Levine, the owner of Lowell Hall on Langdon Street. Lowell Hall had been constructed in 1960 as a private

women's dormitory. Levine was in financial trouble due to changes in the living habits of the student body, and University enrollment regulations. The building originally held 298 students, but because of falling occupancy Levine had converted much area to conference rooms and was using the building like a convention center. He offered to sell Lowell Hall to the University for \$3.55 million. This seemed to the regents like a perfect solution to the extension's building problem, and on April 10, 1970 the regents agreed to meet Levine's price. The funding came from the State appropriation and the University added \$770,000 in funds to be amortized by user fees of the guest house. The Extension moved into and began using the building immediately and found it highly satisfactory. The dilemma seemed to have been nicely solved.<sup>1</sup>

Then the dam broke. A reporter for the Green Bay Press- Gazette, Tim Wyngaard, wrote a story that alleged that the University had bought the building without getting a fair market appraisal, and had simply accepted Levine's word for the building's value. The state attorney general, Robert Warren investigated the charges and revealed that Levine had been close to bankruptcy and that president F. H. Harrington had "pushed" the regents into the purchase. Warren also found an appraiser who was willing to say that the building had been overpriced. He concluded "It is an inescapable conclusion that Lowell Hall was purchased calculated to remove Mr. Levine from his financial difficulties." As a result of this report, in June 1971 new governor Lucey appointed a commission, headed by retired supreme court justice George Currie to investigate the deal. The Currie report concluded that no wrongdoing was found, and that although better safeguards against poor appraisals had to be taken, in this case the University had gotten a good deal. The state's newspaper blazed brightly for a few weeks, but eventually the scandal died out. By that time president Harrington was gone from the scene, having resigned in May 1970. It is likely that the uproar was part of a partisan political effort to remove Harrington, who was under fire from legislators and regents alike for not cracking down on student demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

The building the regents had bought was built during the summer of 1960 by Lowell Associates, a family business represented by Robert Levine. It was intended as a luxury dorm, and appealed especially to well to do women students from the east coast. It was a seven story tower of reinforced concrete faced with brick, and aluminum windows. The original plans by Eugene Wasserman of Sheboygan are dated 3-23-1959. The building covers an area of about 17000 square feet. It is 120 feet from north to south, and 160 feet east to west, and 97 feet high. The basement contains a full food service and dining rooms, as well as a 35 by 45 foot swimming pool. In 1966 the Lowell corporation built a 65 by 50 foot seven story addition on the Frances Street side that added 28 more double rooms. This addition was also designed by Wasserman.<sup>3</sup>

Lowell Hall was so ideally suited to use as the Extension Guest House, that in 25 years little more than cosmetic changes have been made. The current configuration includes 72 guest suites with air conditioning, and private baths. Eight large conference rooms accommodate groups of 10 to 200 people. The food service is capable of serving up to 400 people. Guest can use the swimming pool and sauna in the basement. The north wing of the building has been converted to offices for the extension and some University departments.

1) Report to President Kopp, from Charles Stathas and Wallace Lemon, June 23, 1972, series 40/1/13/1 box 21. Regent's Minutes, October 16, 1970,

2) *Daily Cardinal*, November 30, 1972, March 1, 1973; *Badger Herald*, October 9-11, 1972; *Beloit Daily News*, June 28, 1972; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 13, 1973; *Milwaukee Journal*, February 13, 1973, February 14, 1973, June 20, 1973; *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 13, 1972, February 1, 1973; *Green Bay Press Gazette*, September 21, 1972; *Appleton Post Crescent*, June 21, 1972; *Capital Times*, October 27, 1972; The Curry Report, May 8, 1973, series 40/13/1 box 21.

3) *Daily Cardinal*, September 30, 1959, March 29, 1960; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October 1961, p. 23; Analysis of and appraisal of Lowell Hall by the department of space management, January 30, 1970, series 4/31/9-1 box 5. Plans at the department of planning and construction.