

NAVAL ROTC ARMORY



Fig. 1. Naval ROTC armory December, 1994. The original front of the building had a semicircular drive in entrance. [Author Photo, AP-13]

Originally a gas station built about 1927, the Blackhawk garage, was purchased by the University in 1942. It served as home to the Naval radio school until the end of WW II. In 1948 the building became the home of the Naval ROTC program.

In 1925 when the Badger Garage oil company and service station opened at 1610 University Avenue it had been only nine years since automobiles had begun to outsell the horse in Madison.¹ The Badger garage was bought out by the Blackhawk Motor company in 1927. It is probable that the existing building, designed by architect Alvan Adams, was built at that time. The front of the building on University was a semicircular drive-in filling station. The Blackhawk garage operated successfully throughout the 1930s, on the strength of its proximity to the relatively wealthy and auto owning University Heights neighborhood.

The university assumed that eventually it would obtain this property; president Dykestra wrote: "From the long term point of view the University has always expected some time or other to be able to take over this property for we now own on both sides of it and any future plan of development of our campus would require this area."²

The immediate attempts to acquire the property began in January of 1942, when Dykestra wrote to regent M. J. Cleary to inform him that the Blackhawk Garage was available "at a fine price", and that it would be useful to the university as temporary laboratories for the training of short course students in defense industries. Dykestra asks Cleary to present the matter of funding this purchase to

governor Heil. The hope was to obtain funds from the state emergency fund.³ On January 19, 1942 the university had realtor Paul Stark obtain a two week option on the property for \$47,500. Later that month dean of engineering F. Ellis Johnson informs Dykestra that the Blackhawk garage will require an estimated \$60,000 in modifications to make it suitable for use by the departments of electrical or chemical engineering. Johnson says that even with these expensive alterations, the building would be acceptable only as temporary quarters, but that the departments were so cramped that they would be happy to have even this small help.⁴ The following day Dykestra wrote to Elmer Barlow at the state tax commission to explain the university's need for the property. He told Barlow that the principal need was for laboratory space for the department of agricultural engineering, and that the university plans to use the building as is, except for better lighting and some benches. A week later the realtor Paul Stark told Dykestra that Barlow reported a lukewarm reception from governor Heil, who believed that "very likely, the boys know more about repairing farm machinery than the professors."⁵

In March of 1942, the Navy requested that the university establish a training school in radio and naval communications on the campus. There would be a total of 1200 students, 300 at a time, staying in university dorms, with the navy paying rent as well as equipment, wear and tear, modification and amortization charges.⁶ The school began on April 1, 1942. During the summer of 1942 navy Commander Heslar, university building and grounds director Albert Gallistel, and state engineer Willson, inspected the Blackhawk property and agreed that it would provide an ideal code room for the navy program. On August 4, 1942, the regents voted to purchase the Blackhawk Garage for the reduced price of \$38,500 and to proceed with remodelling for use in the navy program, to be paid for by the navy. These alterations were estimated to cost \$21,200. The 108 foot X 112 foot, building was brick and concrete construction with steel trusses and frame roof, and contained a 64' X 68' basement with boiler and coal rooms.

The naval radio school moved into the remodelled Blackhawk garage in mid-September 1942. They stayed until war's end. At that time, the regents authorized president Fred to apply for a four year naval ROTC program. The university could meet all requirements except that for space. The regents planned for a program which could accommodate 400-500 students, creating a "little Annapolis".⁷ Some preliminary plans were made for a naval science building. These plans died in the building crunch that followed WW II. The naval ROTC program first appears in the university catalogs in the fall semester of 1948 and the program was housed at 1610 University Avenue, where it remains until the present day.

1) Mollenhoff, *Madison a History of the Formative Years*, p. 366; Madison city directories, State Historical society library. Dane county register of deeds.

2) Dykestra to Barlow, January 28, 1942.

3) Dykestra to Cleary, January 17, 1942.

4) Johnson to Dykestra, January 27, 1942.

5) Memo dated February 6, 1942.

6) Regent's Minutes, March 14, 1942, p. 7. This request was first made February 20, 1942 by rear admiral John Downes.

7) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April 1945, p. 4.