

# NEW GYMNASIUM



Fig. 1. The new gym from the air 1997. The pyramid shaped section is unit I, everything else is Unit II. Observatory Drive runs in front of the building. [Del Brown photo, AP-77]

*The gymnasium was built to replace the outmoded facilities in the red gym and Lathrop Hall. It was designed to be built in three stages. The first stage, the natatorium was built in 1961; the second stage in 1965. The third stage became the Southeast Recreational Facility (SERF).*

After the Memorial Shell was opened in 1955, the pitiful state of the athletics department's physical plant became clear. The studies that were done for the shell and afterwards showed a major school with more than 14,000 student hours per week in gym facilities built in 1892 (the red gym) and 1909 (Lathrop Hall). The requirement that all students pass a swimming test further pointed out the deficits in facilities called "easily the worst in the Big Ten" and "that bathtub in the red gym". Among the issues to be solved were where to put the gym, what to put in it, and how to pay for it.<sup>1</sup>

The first and easiest problem to solve was the site. There were two possibilities, the west end of campus past the new Elm Drive dorms or in the designated expansion area south of University Avenue near Camp Randall. The cost of the land in the area near Camp Randall would have made the cost of the project prohibitive. On September 15, 1958 the regents approved the site selected by the planning commission: west of Elm Drive between the new dormitories and Observatory Drive.<sup>2</sup>

Facilities and funding considerations went hand in hand. Planning meetings through late 1958 and early 1959 worked on the assumption that the gym would be built in three stages. Phase I would

include new pool facilities, crew, fencing and gymnastic areas, and would be funded with loans to be paid off by athletic department income. Phase II would be general gymnasium facilities for student use, and as a classroom building would be funded by the state. The original Unit I plan had a racing pool and a diving pool, seating for 2000 spectators for intercollegiate events, and rowing facilities for crew. It was estimated that this first unit could be built for \$2 million, the amount that could be safely funded by intercollegiate athletic receipts. Consternation was general in January 1960, when preliminary estimates came in at about \$2.6 million. The planners went back to work, armed with a priority list of features from Ivan B. "Ivy" Iverson, the athletic director. What Iverson wanted were swimming facilities. The committee, with the architects Grassold and Johnson, cut and cut more. In summer 1959 they presented the revised plans to the regents. On July 11, 1959 the regents approved the preliminary plans for Unit I of the gym, there was almost nothing left but the two swimming pools.<sup>3</sup>

Another 10 months passed filled with discussion, debate, and revision. The final plans for Unit I were approved on June 7, 1960. Within a week the state had disapproved of the project (or more accurately the funding of the project) on the grounds that athletics were being overemphasized at the expense of academic programs. The governor and building commission members had specific complaints. The planning committee took them under advisement, and reduced the amount of seating around the pool from 2000 to 500, and eliminated some lockers and the crew facilities. These changes allowed some general purpose facilities to be included in Unit I.<sup>4</sup>

In September 1960, the state reversed itself based on the new plans and approved the first Unit of the gym, and its financing by the athletic department. Just when the project looked like it was on the way, the regents began again to debate the location. In the fall of 1960, regents Werner, Konnak, and Gellat brought a motion to restudy the location of Gym Units #2 and #3. After long discussion this motion passed, and the project was back in jeopardy. This question was deferred several times in the next few months as various regents requested new studies of the problem.<sup>5</sup>

Then in December 1960 the business manager reported that bids for Unit I had come in at \$2.4 million, and recommended that all bids be rejected. Within a few months the architects and planners had further reduced the cost of the Unit I plans. Now most of the general gymnasium space was dropped, more seats removed, and steel framing replaced the reinforced concrete roof. This reduced unit could be used on its own or as a core facility to be expanded later, depending on the resolution of the regent's debate over the site of Units 2 and 3. The regents approved these new preliminary plans in April 1961. Final plans were approved on September 20, 1961. Contracts were awarded on December 8, 1961, with the general contract going to Kenneth Sullivan of Madison, for \$587110. Total contracts were for \$ 1.25 million. Funding was by \$300,000 from the athletic departments funds, and \$950,000 in loans to be repaid by the athletic department from intercollegiate receipts. Construction began immediately. Delayed only slightly by a Teamster's strike in 1962, the Gymnasium Unit I or the Natatorium as it was now known was opened for use in the fall of 1963.<sup>6</sup>

The Gymnasium Unit I was a pyramid shape 150 feet wide and 200 feet deep, of steel and concrete sheathed in two contrasting brick colors. It contained a 60 by 75 foot racing pool, a 43 by 50 foot diving pool, a 140 by 41 foot gymnasium, classrooms, and offices. It was a Spartan building, with painted cement block walls on the interior. Bleachers were available for about 500 spectators at poolside.<sup>7</sup>

The construction of unit II went much more smoothly, because much planning had already been done, expectations were more reasonable, and because it was funded by the state. The discussion of a new site for units 2 and 3 had died away. On August 14, 1964 the regents approved preliminary plans for unit II at an estimated cost of \$3.8 million. Final plans were approved on August 20, 1965. It was estimated that the building would be ready for use by July 1967. Funds had been allocated by the state in the 1965-67 building budget. Contracts were let on October 22, 1965, for a total of \$3.14 million.

General contractor was Anthony Grignano of Madison for \$1.63 million. Opened for use in the fall of 1967, the gym unit II is a huge 250 by 300 foot structure that wraps around Unit I on the east, west and north sides. It is two levels high containing 8 gymnasiums, squash and racquetball courts, enormous amounts of locker room facilities, classrooms and a library. The exterior is entirely sheathed in brick. Unit III plans were subsumed into the construction of the Southeast Recreational Facility (SERF) on Dayton Street. The University had its new modern gymnasium. The red gym, whose destruction was widely expected still stands.<sup>8</sup>

- 1) Need for Adequate Indoor Facilities ... At the University of Wisconsin, 1956, Lindley J. Stiles, dean school of Education, series 24/9/2 box 11; *Daily Cardinal*, February 28, 1956.
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, September 20, 1958, December 6, 1958; *Daily Cardinal*, April 16, 1958, July 24, 1958, September 20, 1958, November 8, 1958; Minutes of Gymnasium sub-Committee Meetings, February 19, 1958, November 12, 1958, Jakobson to Peterson, July 22, 1958, series 24/9/2 box 10; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1958, p. 24.
- 3) Minutes of Gymnasium sub-Committee Meetings, January 23, 1959, February 17, 1959, April 24, 1959, May 27, 1959, memo, Ivan Williamson to Gymnasium sub-Committee, May 1959 series 24/9/2 box 11; *Regent's Minutes*, July 11, 1959, January 1960.
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, June 7, 1960, October 7-8, 1960, ; *Daily Cardinal*, June 17, 1960, March 12, 1960, July 19, 1960, September 9-10, 1960.
- 5) *Regent's Minutes*, May 14, 1960, exhibit C, July 8, 1960, September 9, 1960, October 7-8, 1960 exhibit B, November 4-5, 1960 exhibit D.
- 6) *Regent's Minutes*, December 9, 1960, January 6, 1961, April 7, 1961, May 12, 1961; *Daily Cardinal*, January 7, 1961, May 3, 1961, May 4, 1961, July 20, 1961, October 20, 1961, November 17, 1961, December 8, 1961; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1961, p. 30;
- 7) Plans in plans room of physical plant.
- 8) *Regent's Minutes*, August 14, 1964, August 20, 1965, October 22, 1965; *Daily Cardinal*, March 4, 1967, March 2, 1968.