

# OLD Y. M. C. A.



Fig. 1. Old YMCA on Langdon Street, east wing of memorial union at left, c. 1955. After the union went up in 1926, the YMCA became more of a rooming house as the two-room suites were converted to singles. It housed as many as 135 men in the 1940s. [folder 27/4 jf-26]

*Built in 1905 by the YMCA on the current site of the union parking lot, this building acted as a precursor to the Memorial Union. After the YMCA erected a new building in 1953, the old one was obtained by the University and demolished in 1956.*

The earliest mention of a Young Men's Christian Association on the UW Madison campus appears in the postscript of a letter from John Muir to his sister Sarah, June 1, 1863, in which Muir says he was elected president of the Y. M. C. A.<sup>1</sup> In 1884 at the state convention of the YMCA in LaCrosse it was decided that young women should be excluded from the association.<sup>2</sup> In 1887 the association which had been husbanding its building fund from the Muir years bought for \$10,000 the west of the armory at what became 740 Langdon Street. In 1889, the student newspaper, the Aegis complains that the YMCA's proposed building site will interfere with the use of the lower campus for athletics.<sup>3</sup> There would be no reason for alarm for years.

The first notice of an actual plan to build comes in 1892 when it is reported that the YMCA intends to "put up a building that will surpass considerably any similar structure at any college or University in the United States." In 1899, the YMCA reached an agreement with the YWCA, with whom the lot had been purchased, that the YMCA will proceed with the building plans, which will include quarters for the women's group. In 1900 the association publishes plans of their building. It has grown to five floors with dormitory housing on the upper floors.<sup>4</sup>

By 1902 the cost is estimated at \$75,000, The association was insistent that the building will be primarily for the use of the student body. "The general utility of the building is contemplated to be for the university, particularly the student body, and the students and faculty are invited to contribute in a variety of ways to its erection."<sup>5</sup> Several faculty members are quoted regarding the favor in which they regard the YMCA project. In 1904 the association reports that they have raised \$52,000 from



Fig. 2. May, 1956, the old YMCA, worn out and dangerous after twice its intended life-span, is demolished. The Memorial Union is partly visible at the right. Since the demolition the old YMCA lot has served as a parking lot for the union. [Old YMCA folder ns-1704]

subscriptions in Madison and Milwaukee.

In October 1904, after more than ten years of planning, a construction contract was signed between the association and local Madison contractor T. C. McCarthy for \$60,000.<sup>6</sup> The architect was given as E. J. Colton of the N. Y. Association, but the published drawings are signed by Leenmouts and Guthrie of Milwaukee. The foundation was dug in the fall of 1904. Completion was intended for October of 1905, but was delayed until April 25, 1906. It had cost nearly \$100,000 with furnishings. It had room for 66 students, a number of meeting rooms, and an auditorium holding about 600, and facilities on the first floor dedicated to the YWCA. It was built of brick with Bedford limestone trim.

By late 1907 the building became the student union for all intents and purposes, with student activities in the lower levels, and student housing in the upper. It was the only cafeteria or men's dormitory on the UW campus. Student handbooks were printed and distributed free.

Some complained that the union smelled faintly of piety, but until the university union was built it was tolerable (some felt that the 'Y' delayed and obstructed the development of the university union).

In 1946 the association decided to erect a new building. The 'Y' explained that the old building was overcrowded and that it had been built as a temporary building (with 'sand bricks' and non-fireproof stairwells) and had been meant to last twenty years, had already lasted forty and was worn out and unsafe. Finally in 1953 the YMCA erected a new building at Brooks and Johnson Streets. The old YMCA was sold to the University of Wisconsin Foundation who presented it as a gift to the university on April 8, 1955, with the stipulation that nothing could be built on the site which would obstruct the view of Lake Mendota. In May 1956, it was razed. [see Fig. 2]

1) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October, 1953 p. 22.

2) University Press, November 1, 1884, p. 4-5. An editorial decried the decision, and solicited similar opinions from a number of respected faculty members. Notable responses included: J. C. Freeman: "...a relic of barbarism."; D. B. Frankenburger: "...too stupid to be discussed."; and Edward Birge: "unintelligent, unchristian and opposed to true religious success."

3) *The Aegis*, January 11, 1889, p. 4. "If the association remains determined to build on a lot it has fairly bought, it will surely incur animosity towards itself, and the building will stand between the Regents and the association, as a monument to their obstinacy."

4) *The Daily Cardinal*, May 22, 1900, p. 1.

5) *The Daily Cardinal*, May 16, 1902.

6) *The Daily Cardinal*, October 5, 1904 p.1.