

# STEENBOCK LIBRARY



Fig. 1. The Harry Steenbock Memorial Library from the east, 1970. [series 9/3, Steenbock, jf-90]

*The Steenbock Library was built in 1967 to house the libraries of the College of Agriculture, as well as those of botany, zoology, biophysics and biochemistry. It opened in January 1969. It is named for Harry Steenbock, renowned UW biochemist, professor and discoverer of vitamin D.*

The planning, and construction of the Steenbock Memorial Library is an inspiring example of how well the University's building process can work. In short, the need was defined, a plan created, funding obtained, and the building erected, in a remarkably short time, and free of the delays, false starts and conflicts that typically marked similar projects of the time (e. g. Helen C. White Hall and Union South).

The need for the agricultural library was formally stated in 1964. A draft (by M. L. Redfern) of the need paper states that the old agricultural library (built in 1902) in Agriculture Hall had space for 177 readers and 80,000 books. 20,000 volumes were stored in the attic of the Stock Pavilion. It was estimated that by 1985 there would be a need to house 300,000 volumes and accommodate 1500 readers, and a growth of staff from five to twenty. The estimated cost was \$3 million. The project appears on the 1965-67 building program. Building committee meetings began in July 1965. The committee consisted of chairman G. W. Sledge, E. M. Pittenger, A. D. Hasler, R. H. Burris, Louis

Kaplan, H. H. Nelson, R. D. Powers, M. L. Redfern and D. H. Sites. The presence of library personnel (Kaplan and Pittenger), scientists (Hasler) and building specialist Sites, was a key factor in the smooth progress of the project. A request for project approval was considered at the December 1965 meeting of the state building commission. This request emphasizes the difficulty that Memorial Library is having in coping with the huge enrollments and burgeoning collections. The new facility will relieve congestion from Memorial, while providing additional storage, research and study space and would house the libraries of botany, zoology, biophysics and biochemistry.<sup>1</sup>

At their October 1965 meeting the regents approved the site for the library as the southwest corner of Babcock Drive and Observatory Drive, north of Russell labs. This space was in use as a rugby practice field. The regents were told that the library would be about four stories high, and would provide study areas for students living in the dormitories on that end of campus. At their November meeting, the regents authorized the preparations of preliminary plans. Funds were described as \$1.3 million from the state, and the balance to be provided from a private gift to be announced later.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1966 the committee asked the state to retain an architect at the earliest possible date. In early March the state selected Weiler, Strang and McMullin. Later that month the committee held its first planning meeting with the architects. They discussed the entire design and visited the site. These meetings continued on a monthly basis for the entire life of the project. By the meeting of August 1966 the preliminary layout and design of the library was approved by the committee. The regents at their September meeting voted to approve the preliminary plans. It was explained that the library would be on four levels (low enough to provide a good visual contrast with Russell labs and other proposed high-rises in the area, cost about \$2.7 million, and be ready by September 1968. It was revealed at this meeting that the special gift fund for the project would come from WARF.<sup>3</sup>

The regents accepted the final plans for the library at their meeting of February, 1967. The estimated completion date was now December 1968, and cost estimated at \$2.8 million, depending on the bids for an extra amount of excavation in the basement. On May 5, 1967 the regents awarded construction contracts for a total of \$2.61 million. The general contractor was J. H. Findorff and Son for \$1.5 million. The general contract included the construction of the extensive terracing and landscaping around the building. The source of funds was: state funds \$1.39 million; gifts and grants: \$1.21 million. The WARF grant for \$1.21 million was formally accepted by the regents on July 7, 1967. WARF also agreed to fund additional items if reasonable bids were received. These included the additional basements space, snow melting equipment and a better quality of carpet. All these items were added and funded by WARF.<sup>4</sup>

In keeping with the fortunes of the project, construction sailed through without significant delays. The regents voted at their January 1968 meeting to name the building "the Harry Steenbock Memorial Library".<sup>5</sup>

The library was opened for use on January 6, 1969, although director Pittenger was not completely finished moving books from the old library. A faint odor of livestock was reported in the vicinity of some collections, which had been stored for years in the attic and basement of the stock pavilion.<sup>6</sup>

The building is 162 feet square of reinforced concrete. There are five full levels; a basement, the ground floor with reading rooms, study carrels, stacks and a lounge, both below street level. The three upper levels are reading rooms and stacks, with staff offices on the second floor. Main access is from the sunken plaza off Babcock Drive. The upper levels are sheathed in face brick to match the nearby Russell lab building. The library building was designed for maximum flexibility and the main areas contain no corridors. The library is an open stack design. It later received a prestigious design award from the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. A small number of windows provide beautiful views from the upper reading areas. The carpet and open design do a remark-

able job of muting noise in the library.<sup>7</sup>

The formal dedication of the library took place on June 15, 1969, with tributes to Harry Steenbock, the scientist, teacher and citizen, from governor Knowles, vice-president Clodius, regent Renk, and WARF director Frautschi. Dr. Steenbock's widow unveiled a portrait of Steenbock by artist in residence Aaron Bohrod, which hangs in the memorial room on the first floor. In 1970 the basement was finished for use by the forestry department, the University archives, and landscape architecture.<sup>8</sup>

- 1) Need for expansion of the Agricultural Library, undated, Minutes of Agricultural Library Building Committee Meeting, August 13, 1965, Agency Request for State Building Commission Action, December 14, 1965, series 24/9/3 box 6.
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, October 22, 1965, November 12, 1965; *Daily Cardinal*, October 23, 1965.
- 3) Pound to Edsall, January 4, 1966, Postweiler to Lorenz, March 8, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 6; Sledge to Building Committee, July 19, 1966, Building Committee Meeting #1 through #23, March 23, 1966 - August 31, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 9; *Regent's Minutes*, September 9, 1966.
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, February 10, 1967, May 5, 1967, exhibit Q, July 7, 1967, exhibit A; Culbertson to J. H. Findorff & Son, May 18, 1967, series 24/9/3 box 9;
- 5) *Regent's Minutes*, January 12, 1968.
- 6) *Capital Times*, January 4, 1969, May 31, 1969; *Daily Cardinal*, January 7, 1969; *UW Library News*, volume XIV #6, June 1969.
- 7) *Milwaukee State Journal*, March 2, 1969; *Badger Herald*, March 16-19, 1972.
- 8) Dedication pamphlet, June 15, 1969, Archives "Steenbock Library" subject file. Lorenz to Lemon, March 22, 1971, series 40/1/7-1 box 126;