

# VAN HISE DORMITORIES

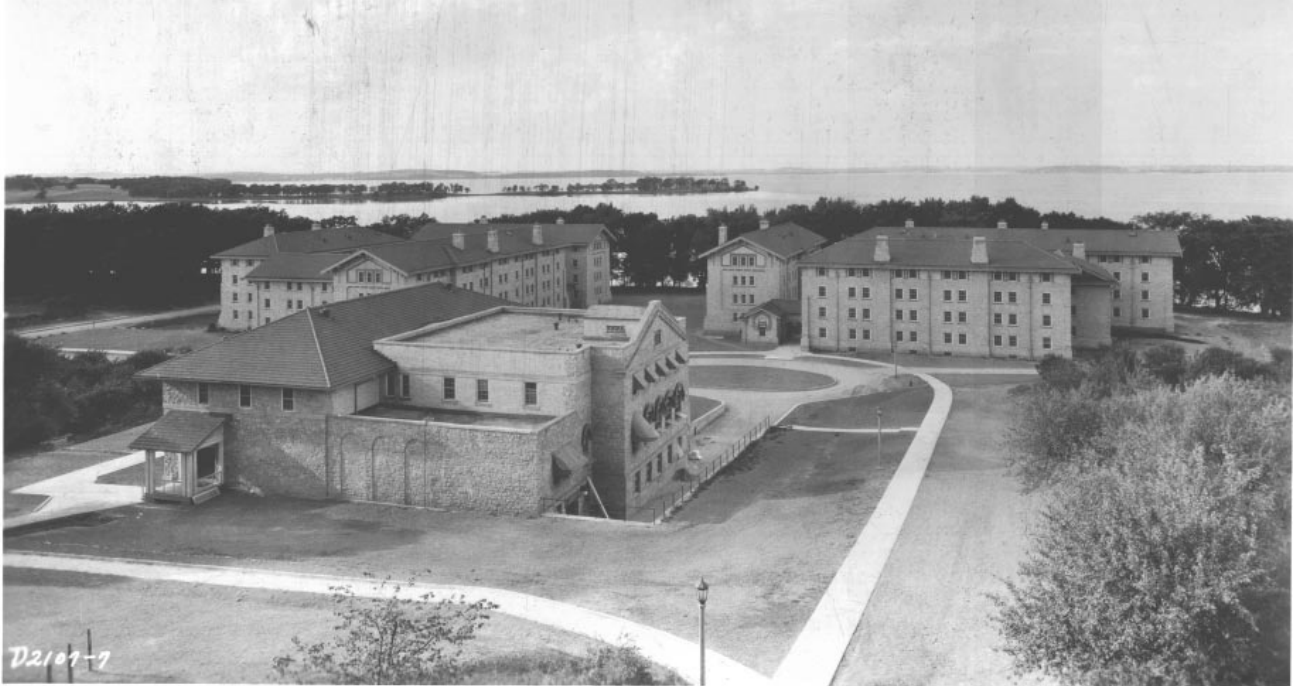


Fig. 1. Van Hise dorms 1929. Refectory in foreground, Adams Hall left, Tripp Hall right. [series 26/1, Exterior Views, Tripp and Adams, x25-1917]

*The Van Hise dorms were built in 1926, as the first on-campus men's housing since North Hall was converted to classrooms in 1884. Tripp, Adams, and the Van Hise refectory (later renamed Carson Gulley Commons) building were first occupied in the fall of 1926. They were briefly used as women's and military housing in the 1940s, and the interiors have been extensively remodelled.*

The genesis of the Van Hise dormitories lies in the inaugural speech given by president-elect Charles Van Hise in 1904. Van Hise made a strong plea for the English system involving halls of residence, commons, unions and athletic fields. "The communal life of instructors and students in work, in play and in social relations is the very essence of the spirit of Oxford and Cambridge ... for some reason these universities have produced an astonishingly large proportion of great statesmen, writers and scientists." He points out that until the time of the fire that destroyed the old Science Hall, the university of Wisconsin had been organized along the lines of the English system. Discussing the results of the fire, after which North and South Halls were converted for classroom space, Van Hise says: "Without ... any thought of the profound change which was being made in the character of the university, the students were turned from the dormitories, and halls of residence for men at Wisconsin were abandoned."<sup>1</sup> Van Hise also says: "...when the student goes out into the world, there is no part of his education which is of such fundamental importance as capacity to deal with men, to see the other fellow's point of view ... He must adjust himself to others. He must be genial, fair, likeable, or else his lot is rightly a hard one."<sup>2</sup>



Fig 2. Van Hise dorms c. 1930. Tripp, Adams, and refectory, with King Hall in background. Note that the area east of Tripp Hall, now a vast parking lot, was at that time still in use by the agricultural college as experimental plots. [series 26/1, Exterior Views, Tripp and Adams, x25-1912]

But each year Van Hise would include in the requested appropriations money for men's residence halls, and each year was disappointed. Finally in his 1913-1914 report to the regents Van Hise reported that the legislature of 1913 had appropriated \$300,000 for a men's dormitory, commons and union. A location for the dormitory was selected and plans were drawn by architect Arthur Peabody. Sadly for the project, the legislature of 1915 changed its mind, cancelling the appropriation. With the outbreak of WW I building at the university virtually ceased. Then on November 19, 1918 a week after Armistice Day Van Hise died unexpectedly. Principal among the advances of the next few years was the development of a new way of funding dormitory projects.

The first proposed method of funding residence halls was to lease university land to private investors who would construct the buildings and lease them back to the university. The state attorney general opined that no legal basis for this procedure was in place. After some further study another approach was tried. In 1922 the regents set up a nonprofit corporation, the Wisconsin University Building Corporation (WUBC), controlled completely by the regents which would lease university land, raise capital (by borrowing from university general and trust funds, or from the public) and build the dormitories. The dormitories would be leased back to and operated by the regents. In late 1922 this scheme of investing the university's surplus in revolving funds was approved by the legislature. The surplus revolving fund had been substantially expanded in August 1915, when J. Stephen Tripp, a lawyer and banker from Prairie du Sac left the bulk of his estate, about \$350,000 to the university without reservations of any kind.

With the issue of funding the dormitories now well in hand, the regents turned their effort to the organization of the dormitory system. They appointed a faculty committee to report on the development of social life of the university, particularly with respect to the architectural plans for the Memorial Union Building and dormitories.

This committee included Harold C. Bradley, Scott Goodnight, and Charles Sumner Slichter. With the help of John Dollard, secretary of the Wisconsin Union, the committee examined dormitory systems at a dozen North American colleges; they discussed the plans with other faculty members, consulted with architect Arthur Peabody, and generally studied the question from every conceivable angle. It is important to remember that there had been no communal men's living arrangements since the science hall fire in 1884. The university was embarking on a difficult undertaking and the fact that



Fig 3. One of the two quadrangles under construction 1926. [Meuer photo vol. 12, p.132, M198]

it was a spectacular success is due in large part to the skills and thoroughness of the men on this committee.

In their January 1925 report the committee suggested that the dormitories, in the words of John Dollard: "should make student living conditions less costly, more comfortable, more thoroughly decent ... lessen social distinctions in student society ... and help to develop a vigorous and healthy morale." <sup>3</sup> Van Hise would have agreed wholeheartedly. The committee recommended the type of building they thought most likely to obtain the desired result, the entry-quadrangle type, several separate structures grouped to enclose a central court, with a separate door for each building of a varied and noninstitutional character. The buildings would be divided into houses with each house containing thirty men mostly in single rooms (with a few doubles). Each house would have a common room to help promote the social unity of the men in the house.

The committee at first believed that the dormitories should be reserved for freshmen, since they were most in need of the influences and advantages provided by the dorms. But as time went on they decided that each house would benefit by the inclusion of an older man as a dormitory "leader". He should aid the younger men by example, by counsel and by friendly interest. This idea later became the "house fellow" system. Later the proportion of freshmen to older students was adjusted to "leaven the lump of green freshmen". On the recommendation of architect Peabody the regents also decided to build a separate refectory for kitchen and dining facilities, rather than to place these functions in the basement of the residence halls as originally planned.

Finally at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the regents on October 16, 1925, the regents awarded the construction contracts for the construction of "Two Dormitory Quadrangles each quadrangle to consist of three buildings." The general construction contract was awarded to Walter W. Oeflein of Milwaukee for 550,310.34. The subcontracts, architect's fees and miscellaneous costs brought the total to \$720,000. At the same meeting the contracts were awarded for the construction of the refectory building. The general contractor was J. P. Cullen and Son of Janesville for \$74,211. Subcontracts and miscellaneous cost brought the total for the refectory to \$102,843. The grand total for the projects contracts was \$823,435.

The construction of the dormitory group was unusually trouble free. In March of 1926, the contractor told the Cardinal that they were a month ahead of schedule. By May 1926 the goal of using the dorms in the fall of 1926 was clearly in reach and the rules governing applications for

residency in the new dorms were published. By September 21, 1926 the Cardinal reports that Tripp and Adams Halls are fully occupied by more than 500 freshmen of the class of 1930. The four story buildings were steel framed, with concrete foundations and floors. Exterior cladding was Madison sandstone rubble and stucco, with stone trim. Approval of their appearance was widespread. The dream of Charles Van Hise had become a reality twenty three years after its first exposition.<sup>4</sup>

If the beginnings were complicated, and the construction simple, the operation of the dormitory was fraught with difficulty. No amount of planning could conjure up the reality of five hundred college freshmen living by their own rules.

The dormitory committee had decided early that residents should set their own rules with "the exception of certain fundamentals as to drinking, women and gambling ... officers of the university should step in only in case of an offence committed against the university body politic, it's good name or reputation."<sup>5</sup> On the *first night* in the new dorms a group from Adams Hall with saxophones, clarinets, and other noisemakers woke everyone within earshot until a group in Tripp Hall counter attacked with fire hoses. The following day the groups met to discuss house rules and quiet hours. Throughout that first year reports of students organizing, bargaining and compromising over the rules for the dorm make a strong case for the committee having guessed correctly.<sup>6</sup>

But the second year of the residence halls experiment, a new variable was introduced. Alexander Meiklejohn's experimental college arrived. The 'x-college' was an experiment to examine alternative ways of educating freshmen and sophomores in a university setting. As an experimenter, Meiklejohn wanted and remarkably got the use of half of Adams Hall to house the x-college. There were to be no subjects or exams in the usual sense, but instead a concentrated life course in thinking reasonably. The instructors would live in the residence halls with the pupils. Introductory course work was a steady diet of fourth and fifth century Athens. This introduction of the x-college into the embryonic dorm system was extremely disruptive for the dorm system. In a typically plain-spoken letter to president Glenn Frank, Dormitory Committee chairman Bradley says that during a discussion with Meiklejohn and his housefellows regarding the alleged breaking of house rules, it became clear that "uncouth behavior in the dining room is considered evidence of intellectual nonconformity, and so is of no moment and by implication a good sign ...The same attitude explains the general disregard of all rules made for the comfort of dormitory residents in general."<sup>7</sup> Meiklejohn's side of the discussion was generally in agreement with Bradley's. He wanted as much segregation and isolation as possible from the rest of the dormitory students. A victim of resistance from students and faculty but mainly declining enrollment the x-college stopped accepting new students in 1931.<sup>8</sup>

The dorms were filled throughout the late 1920s, and the systems supporting them both socially and financially were fine-tuned. The housefellow system in particular took a lot of adjusting, in part because the administration of president Frank allowed for considerable ambiguity in the definition of authority and areas of influence. The dorms were considered so successful that the university had some plans to eventually build very large dormitory groups, the "university city".

The times to come would make the dormitory experiment a trial for everyone. The great depression struck at the heart of the scheme that had allowed the regents to build the dorms. The construction loans were self-amortizing, and therefore depended on keeping the dorms full of students. By 1932 the two quadrangles were filled only to about 75% of capacity. Various means were tried to increase student enrollment in the dorms, including state wide recruiters at high schools. The blame for falling use was a due to a number of factors. Adams Hall in particular had gotten a bad reputation as a place for a student to live during the experimental college era, and this bad name took a long time to disappear. The Daily Cardinal ran continual denigrating articles about life in the dorms, attacking the fellows system and the food quality. Townspeople assailed the university for undermining the established boarding house industry. But mainly the depression was taking an economic toll on

what was after all an economic undertaking. The dorms struggled along through the 1930s cutting costs and boosting enrollment whenever and however they could.

Then as with many American economic institutions they were saved by the outbreak of WW II. Initially in the early 1940s as men left the University and entered the service the dorms appeared to be in serious peril. But university enrollment began to rise again, but now the typical incoming student was female. There were also several thousand members of the military in various training courses on campus. By 1945 there was a shortage of campus housing, although the Cardinal reports that the shortage will most seriously affect women students. In response to this new imbalance Tripp Hall and Adams were opened to women in the fall of 1945. By the following year with its deluge of returning veterans, both dorms were returned to men's housing. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Tripp and Adams remained highly desirable dorms for incoming students. They were remodelled in 1960, to add built in furniture, repaint and generally repair the ravages of forty years of student occupancy.

After the social upheaval of the 1960s, the dorms became opened to both men and women. Several rooms originally intended as singles have been used as double rooms. The capacity of the dorms remains only a little higher than the original figure. They now hold about 550 students.

The names of the quadrangles are Tripp Hall to the east, after J. Stephen Tripp, whose 1915 legacy helped pave the way to the construction of the dorms; and Adams Hall to the west, after Charles Kendall Adams, president of the university (1892-1902). The houses within the quadrangles originally called A-H, have been named after various university benefactors, alumni, and prominent Wisconsin men. The refectory was initially called Van Hise Hall, and then in September 1965 re-named Carson Gulley Commons after longtime head chef Carson Gulley. This is the only university building named after a nonwhite person.

- 1) Van Hise Inaugural Address, June 7, 1904 Van Hise biographical file, University Archives.
- 2) Van Hise Inaugural Address, June 7, 1904 Van Hise biographical file University Archives.
- 3) John Dollard, Report to the Faculty Committee on the Social Needs of Wisconsin Undergraduates, 1924, copies on file at Division of University Housing and UW History Project.
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, October 16, 1925; *Daily Cardinal*, December 13, 1925, p. 1
- 5) John Dollard, Report to the Faculty Committee on the Social Needs of Wisconsin Undergraduates, 1924, copies on file at Division of University Housing and UW History Project.
- 6) *Daily Cardinal*, September 22, 1926, p. 1, September 25, 1926, p. 1.
- 7) Bradley to Frank March 28, 1928 appendix XI to final report on experimental college in University Archives.
- 8) For a full treatment of the Experimental College see Cronon and Jenkins *The University of Wisconsin*, Vol III p. 143-211.