

# VAN VLECK HALL



Fig. 1. This photo shows the three story base with roof plaza, the tower section to the east (right). Sterling Hall is in the foreground. Bascom Hall and the Commerce building are in the background. [Del Brown photo, AP-76]

*Built in 1961 to provide a home for the mathematics department, Van Vleck Hall was the first high rise building on Bascom Hill. It is named for Edward Burr Van Vleck, a member of the mathematics faculty from 1906 to 1929.*

The mathematics department moved from Bascom Hall into north hall in 1919. In north hall were all the faculty offices, the departmental library, and as late as 1930 all the lecture rooms. In the 1930s, as enrollments grew, mathematics lectures began to be held in nearby buildings. Each year this trend, exacerbated by the growth of the sciences which required math background, deepened, until after WW II, mathematics classes were being held in nearly every University building that had a lecture hall. By this time north hall was used only for departmental offices, and was inadequate even for that. In June 1956, the regents first addressed the issue when they voted to approve the Mathematics-Psychology building, either separately or jointly to be located south of University Avenue, in the block bounded by Johnson, Mills, Dayton and Charter Streets. This recognition of the problem encouraged the department to hold meetings to discuss the site and nature of new facilities<sup>1</sup>.

By mid 1958 the department had decided against a site south of University Avenue. The distance from the central campus, and from the new Army Math Research Center (AMRC) then under construction as a wing to Sterling Hall were the main objections. The math department believed that the most appropriate idea was to complete the quadrangle of Sterling Hall. This plan would allow the department to stay on the middle of campus, close to the AMRC, and allow the physics department

access to the math library. This plan was well received by the Physics department, and in January 1959 the regents rescinded their previous action and recommended the addition of a mathematics wing to Sterling Hall. Then in November 1959, the physics department voted to withdraw its "conditional" approval of the plan. The mathematics department had been so convincing in its presentation of Sterling Hall as an ideal site that physics decided it should retain rights to it. This disagreement was resolved in March 1960 when the regents voted to reaffirm the general site of the mathematics building. The physics department gave its approval on two conditions, that the new building be constructed adjacent to and connected to Sterling Hall, and that the remodeling of the old chemistry (Chamberlin) Hall be given a high priority and that space be reserved for physics expansion. In April 1960, the state's department of engineering assigned architects J. J. Flad and Associates to the project.<sup>2</sup>

Flad had preliminary sketches ready by October 1960. The regents had voted at the previous meeting to name the building after Edward Burr Van Vleck, professor of mathematics from 1906 until 1929. Funding was to come mainly from state appropriations, and grants from the NSF and from WARF. The initial budget was \$2.25 million. Early estimates showed a deficit of about \$220,000. Candidates for elimination were one or two floors of the tower section, and the physics lab area. The preliminary plans were approved by the regents in November 1960. The regents were amazed that Flad's design seemed to have created usable space from nowhere, which actually came from extending the slope of the hill outward with the building's walls. They wanted to know if there were other spaces on campus that could be so developed. Dean Wendt suggested building under Bascom Hill, at the social studies site, and the 600 N. Park site.<sup>3</sup>

The final plans were approved by the regents in February 1961. Funds for the full project (\$3 million) were now available thanks to an increase in the amount from the state. When bids were opened in April 1961, they were about \$400,000 over the expanded budget. The regents asked the state to make up the difference. This request was granted in May 1961. Construction contracts were awarded on June 6, 1961. The general contractor was Orville E. Madsen & Son of Minneapolis for \$2.09 million. Ground-breaking took place that same day, attended by J. Flad, mathematics chairman professor Kleene, A. W. Peterson and Dean Mark Ingraham, an ex-mathematics professor. As construction progressed during late 1961 and early 1962, some complaints were heard about the design, and the "defacing" of Bascom Hill. By late 1962 when the size and appearance of the building were obvious, the complaints became louder. An editorial in the Daily Cardinal referred to it by saying "my God! What's that huge eggcrate doing on Bascom Hill"<sup>3</sup> In 1964 the huge eggcrate was given a prestigious state architectural award. The building was dedicated on May 13, 1963.<sup>4</sup>

The building, constructed of steel and reinforced concrete, consists of two main parts. One is a three story lower section (underground except for the roof) 180 by 130 feet, tucked into and connected to the 'L' of Sterling Hall for 32 classrooms, the library and reading rooms. The other section is an eight story 44 by 104 foot, 108 foot high, tower section containing 96 departmental and faculty offices and meeting rooms. The top floor of the tower is a large and spectacular conference room containing an oil portrait of Van Vleck painted by his cousin Howard Van Vleck. The room was furnished with gifts from Edward's son John Van Vleck a professor and Nobel Laureate of physics at Harvard. The roof of the lower section is at ground level and provides a pedestrian plaza and building entrance on Bascom Hill. The lower section is faced with cut stone and brick, while the tower is sheathed in precast concrete panels. Rumors of tilting and settling of Van Vleck have been current on campus since its construction and are uniformly false.<sup>5</sup>

- 1) University Directories; *Regent's Minutes*, June 1956; The most active faculty members were professors R. C. Buck, R. E. Langer, C. C. MacDuffie, P. C. Hammer and S. C. Kleene.
- 2) As part of its agreement with the Army the AMRC had to be housed near the central part of the campus, and could not be moved away to a south campus site; Gallistel to Wendt, December 18, 1958, series 24/9/2 box 11; Rolefson to Ingraham November 17, 1959, series 24/9/2 box 12; *Regent's Minutes*, January 17, 1959, March 12, 1960, it is highly unusual to include the requests of departments in the minutes of the regents when a decision has been affirmed.
- 3) *Regent's Minutes*, September, 1960, October 1960;
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, February 10-11, 1961, April 1961, May 1961, June 1961; *Daily Cardinal*, September 13, 1960, June 16, 1961, September 19, 1962, July 10, 1962; Executive Committee minutes, June 2, 1961. *Capital Times*, May 6, 1963;
- 5) Plans at physical plant plans room; *Daily Cardinal*, April 11, 1963, *Daily Cardinal*, September 19, 1962 p. 2.