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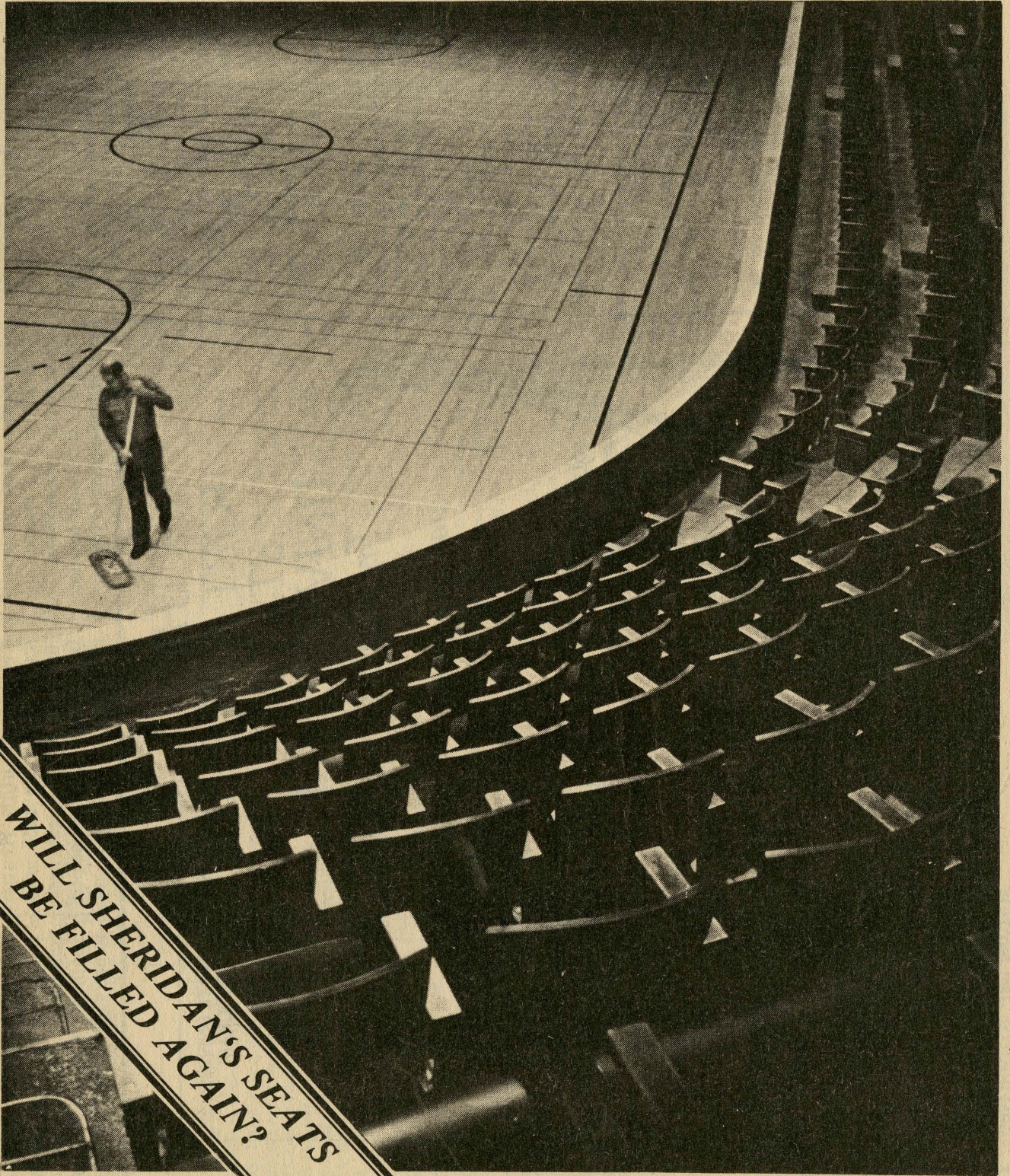
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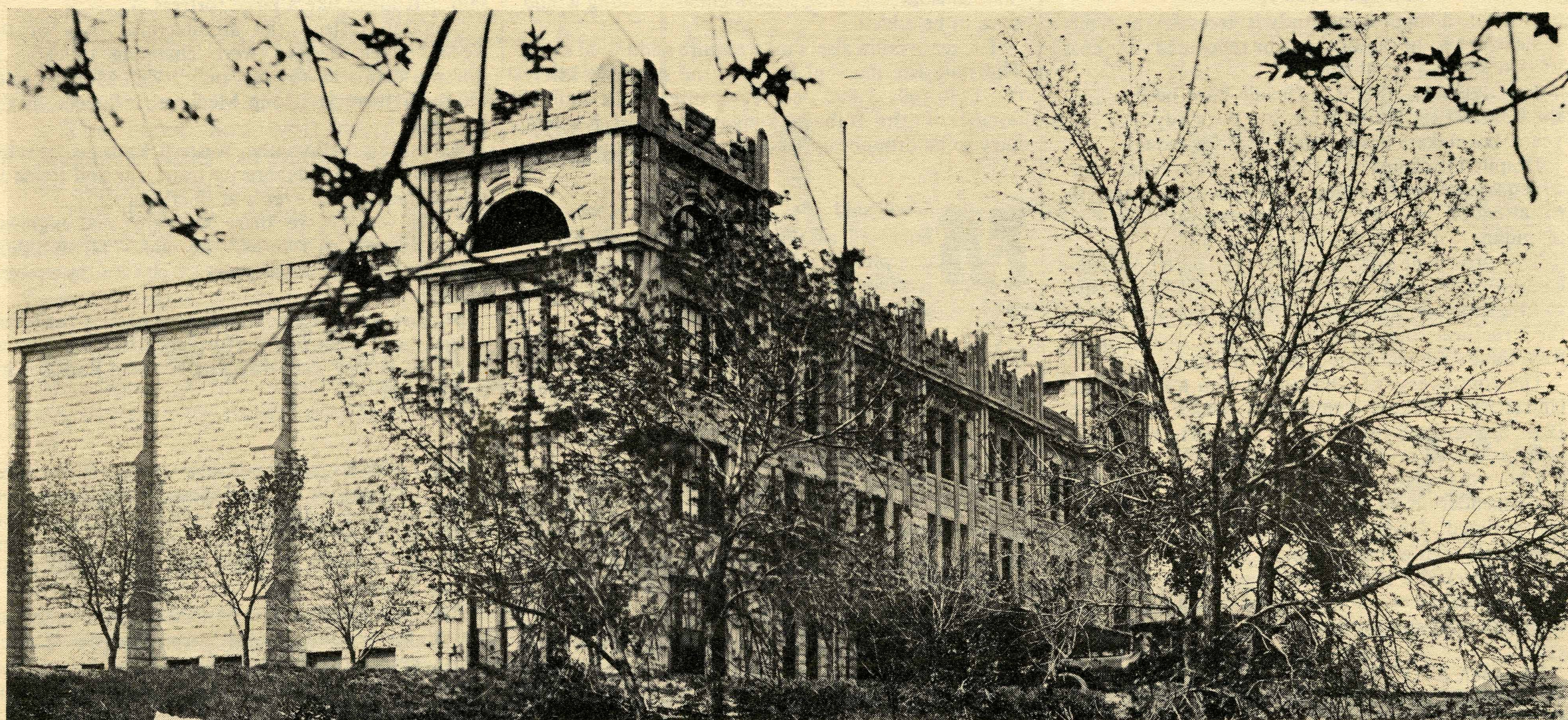
Alumni News

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

SUMMER 1981



WILL SHERIDAN'S SEATS
BE FILLED AGAIN?



By Julie Doll

The 3,000 or so seats are empty now, and probably never again will be filled. Not like they were back in 1963, when fans jammed into "the pit" to watch Coach Cade Suran's Tigers run up the score on another opponent.

As a spanking new edifice in 1917, people traveled for miles — by car, train, and team and wagon — when western Kansas' first grand opera, "Il Travatore," was presented.

Today, however, the 64-year-old seats in Sheridan Coliseum are nearly always empty.

Progress has rendered Sheridan obsolete. And if nothing is done, if it is left to deteriorate, Sheridan could become one of the growing number of buildings at state universities being razed.

Razed like Rarick was, like those razed on other campuses to make room for new buildings, parking lots and driveways.

FHSU President Gerald Tomanek doesn't want to see that happen.

He once remarked that he had to make the decision to raze old Rarick, but he wouldn't be the one to call in the wreckers for Sheridan. He since has modified that declaration: "I hope I don't have to make that decision. It shouldn't be torn down."

But if nothing is done, the building will become a hazard, leaving the university little choice but to tear it down.

For the past 10 years, things haven't been going well for Sheridan.

It was in 1970 that FHSU decided it had grown too big for Sheridan. Work began on a new coliseum, one that could house twice as many people, one that was modern. The *best* in western Kansas.

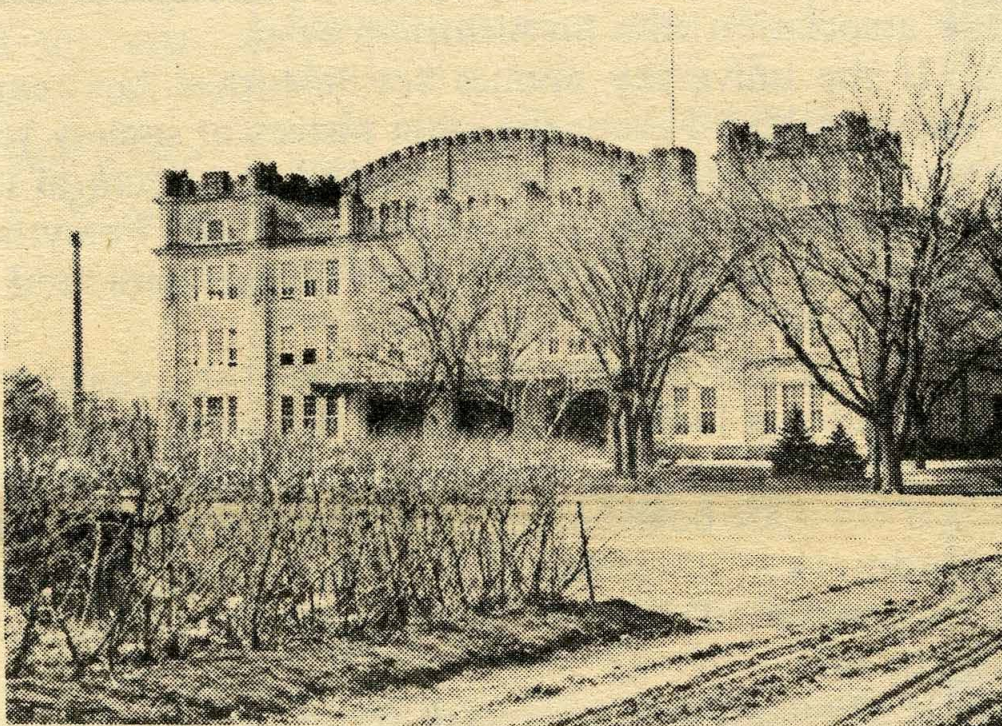
Some 60 years ago, that distinction belonged to Sheridan.

But a lot can happen in six decades. Enrollment jumped to unconceivable heights, and student numbers were reflected by new construction. Buildings were added that were better equipped to handle the tasks formerly assigned to Sheridan.

Sheridan's academic responsibilities continue to decline today.

"Our whole master plan is to get everyone out of this building because it is functionally obsolete," said Brien Murray, FHSU architect and director of physical plant operations.

Many of Sheridan's occupants already have evacuated and moved into the spacious new Rarick,



SHERIDAN: A SHELL OF A COLISEUM

Its past grandeur now only a memory, the campus' third oldest building could be embarking on its final stand unless FHSU finds a source to fund an engineering study.

The coliseum's future is clouded although college officials hope to use the structure as a performing arts center.

which opened in January. Nursing school students and staff will abandon their offices and classrooms sometime this year in favor of a new building designed for them. (Stroup Hall is expected to open before the fall semester.)

When Picken and Martin Allen halls are renovated, the computer center and administrative offices will move, leaving Sheridan virtually empty.

But Tomanek hopes to ensure continued use of Sheridan. Recitals and small concerts will be given in the coliseum, he said, and some offices will be located in the building.

Recalling the building's past grandeur, however, Sheridan now seems merely a shell of its former self.

FHSU officials would like to turn the shell into a useful part of the university by transforming it into a first-rate, 1,200-seat auditorium. The building could be used for concerts and theater productions.

But that will take money — a lot of it — and is contingent on a big "if." Before FHSU officials start raising funds, they need to know whether Sheridan is structurally sound.

The question of Sheridan's fitness begins at the top of the building's west wall and runs the entire length of the limestone structure. Sheridan is marred by a large crack, and the fractured limestone could mean the building is not sound.

The crevice appeared about eight years ago, just after the swimming pool — former practice site for the Fort Hays Duck Club — was drained because it had been replaced with a natatorium in the new sports complex.

Tomanek's theory is that the swimming pool had been leaking, causing moisture to seep into the ground beneath Sheridan. When the pool was drained and the ground dried, the building shifted slightly, causing the wall to crack.

According to Murray's calculations, the fissure's dimensions have not changed since then, which could indicate the building is sound.

Sheridan, however, has other problems.

Like the cracks that have appeared in the tile floor of the foyer, decay has slowly crept into the building.

Hundreds of bats have taken up residence in the rafters. During a rock concert in Sheridan last fall, music rattled them from their roosts. Occasionally, they are found clinging to walls and ceilings throughout the building. The heat- [Cont. on page 2]

JULIE DOLL, a 1979 graduate of Kansas State University with a bachelor's degree in journalism, is a reporter for the Hays Daily News, covering FHSU and political events.

[Cont. from page 1] ing system is archaic and wasteful. The roof leaks badly.

A detailed engineering study is necessary to determine whether the building can be renovated. The cost of that study is set at \$50,000.

For five years, FHSU officials have been asking the Kansas Legislature to finance the study. For five years, lawmakers have passed over the request.

Despite the claims of legislators who say they want to renovate older buildings rather than new ones, little attention has been given to structures such as Sheridan.

This precedent may be changing. The House subcommittee assigned to FHSU has asked the university to hire someone within the Regents system to study the structural soundness of Sheridan, according to Rep. Sandy Duncan, subcommittee chairman.

The controversy of what to do with Kansas State University's Nichols Gymnasium, which burned in 1968, has dragged for 12 years. The 1981 Legislature also has shown no inclination to act.

Two years ago, the Kansas Senate, upon the recommendation of KSU President Duane Acker, appropriated funds to raze the limestone shell, overgrown with weeds and small trees.

That sparked a protest by thousands of students. The proposal to raze was replaced with a \$2,500 appropriation to study what should be done with the gym.

This year, KSU's first capital improvement request was for \$350,000, planning money that would have been used to turn Nichols into a classroom building.

Part of Nichol's problem — like Sheridan's — is that it is not primarily devoted to academic endeavors. Old gyms don't receive the same legislative priority as do classroom buildings.

The delays have made some college officials cynics. Bernd Foerster, dean of the KSU architecture school and an advocate of Nichol's restoration, has said, "If you let it sit long enough, I guess the problem will solve itself."

His point: If left unattended, buildings such as Nichols and Sheridan will deteriorate to the point where renovation is not financially feasible.

The limestone used in Sheridan, Murray said, has begun to "chip," and unless something is done, it will become hazardous.

Chipping is the result of water seeping into hairline cracks of the rock. The water freezes in the fissures and expands, causing the cracks to become larger until chips eventually begin to fall from the building.

The Fort Hays limestone used in Sheridan is softer than most limestones and is more vulnerable to chipping. To prevent further deterioration, the surface of the rock must be sealed to protect it from moisture.

Murray and FHSU staff have been making some plans about other things that need to be done.

In order to create a theater, the coliseum area

would have to completely be rebuilt, Murray said. Slanted floors, lighting equipment and seating would have to be added.

The renovation also would require additional exits. The state fire marshal has said the structure safely can hold only 1,000 people because of the limited number of exits. If the building is renovated, it would have to be brought up to current fire safety codes.

Murray said it's difficult to say just how much all of that would cost until FHSU completes an engineering study and receives some planning money. The alternative to state funding is private money.

FHSU officials say they aren't ruling out the possibility of raising private money to restore and renovate Sheridan, but, right now, they will continue the effort for state funding.

It's a state building, Murray said, and the state should be responsible for the study.

FHSU officials also are looking into the possibility of having Sheridan designated an historical land-

'There's nothing like Sheridan in the area.'

mark. To gain such distinction, a building must be at least 50 years old and have either architectural merit or association with an historical event.

If the university applies for historical landmark status, a board from the state historical society will check the structural soundness and architectural integrity of the building, according to James Forsythe, chairman of the FHSU history department and a member of the historical society.

The society usually demands that the exterior of the building look the same as it did when first constructed, although the building's interior can change.

If the state board approves the site as an historical landmark, it sends its recommendation to Washington, D.C., for a final determination, Forsythe said.

If Sheridan won landmark status, efforts to raise private funds would be enhanced and the state would have added incentive to renovate the building, he said.

Forsythe and Tomanek think the 6,800-square foot building has significant historical and cultural value.

The limestone for the building was quarried in the area, transported to the building site by wagons and horses and constructed entirely by hand, Tomanek said.

"There's nothing like it in the area," Tomanek said. "It looks like a large fortress."

Sheridan reflects the architectural style of the Teens, when designs were changing quickly. It doesn't conform to any one style, Murray said, although there is strong Medieval influence in the design.

According to Forsythe, western Kansans traveled from as far as Lindsborg by train, car and horse to attend the cultural events at Sheridan.

"This was before there was any real highway system in western Kansas," he said. "The building really became the focal point of culture (in western Kansas)."

Because of its location and then-modern facilities, musical and theatrical performers often stopped at Sheridan as they were traveling between Kansas City and Denver.

Sheridan's history also is rich in irony. The 1915 session of the Kansas Senate, dominated by Democrats, approved an appropriation of \$125,000 to build the coliseum, a political maneuver designed to embarrass Republican Gov. Arthur Capper.

The appropriation was lumped together with the rest of the school's budget. And because Capper didn't get the bill until three days before the Legislature adjourned, he had little choice but to approve the entire sum.

It was the only building at a university financed by the state in 1915 and was designed to be used for classes. The gymnasium area — with its dirt floor — also served as a livestock exhibition ring and performing center for cultural events.

Republicans in the House and Senate, as well as many of the state's residents, called the appropriation wasteful and said the building would never be filled.

They said the same things about the coliseum that Gen. Philip Sheridan had said about western Kansas.

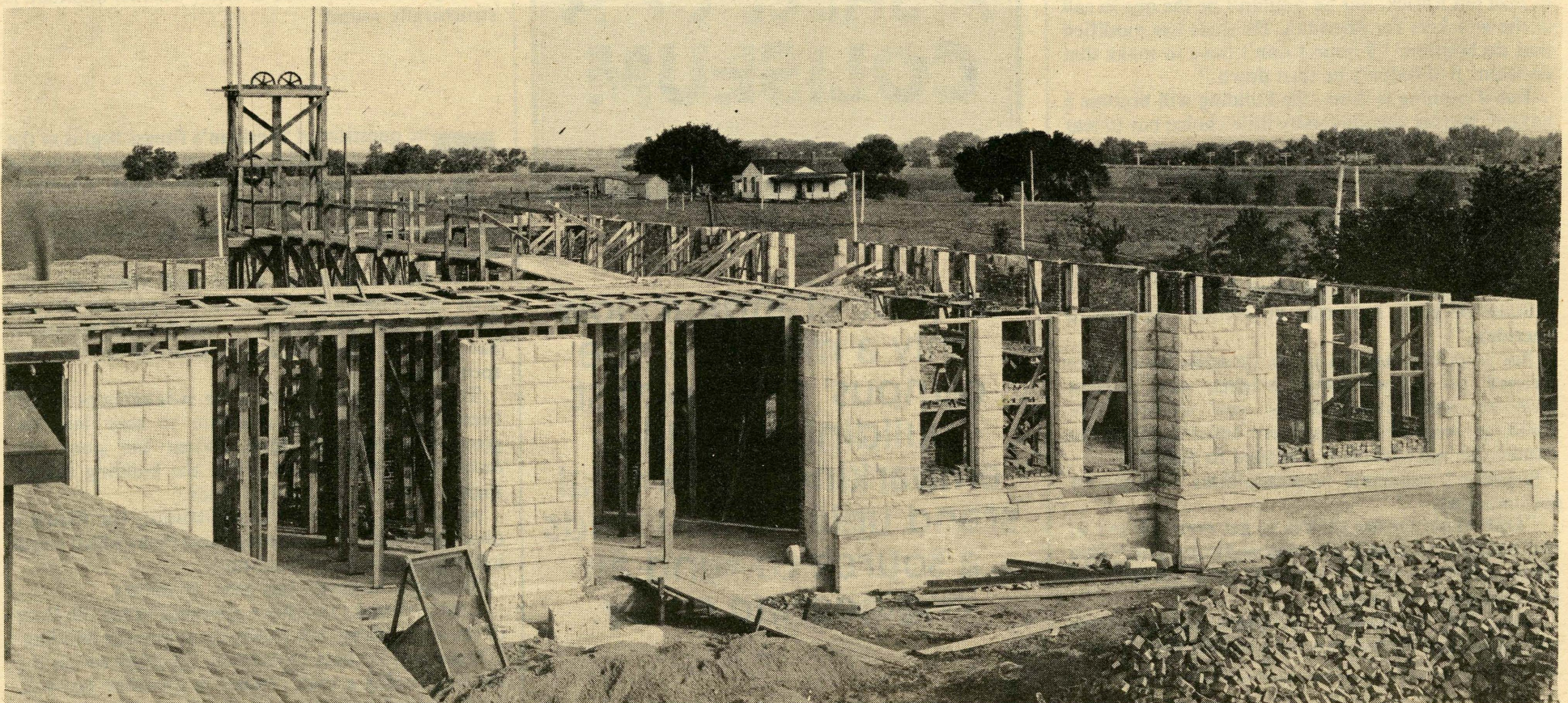
Stationed at Fort Hays in the 1860s, Sheridan wrote in 1866 that "these plains can never be cultivated, never filled with inhabitants capable of self-government and self-defense, but at best can become one vast pasture ground."

Despite Sheridan's pessimistic and inaccurate prediction, the coliseum was named after him, becoming an ironic symbol of progress in western Kansas.

The coliseum's critics also were proven wrong. The first performance in 1917 was a sell-out.

But no one knows if or when that will happen again.

So the seats — with their Fort Hays Normal School monograms — sit empty. And waiting. □



In its building stages in the Teens, Sheridan's vision was to become clear on the virtually empty prairie.