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Bob Lowen

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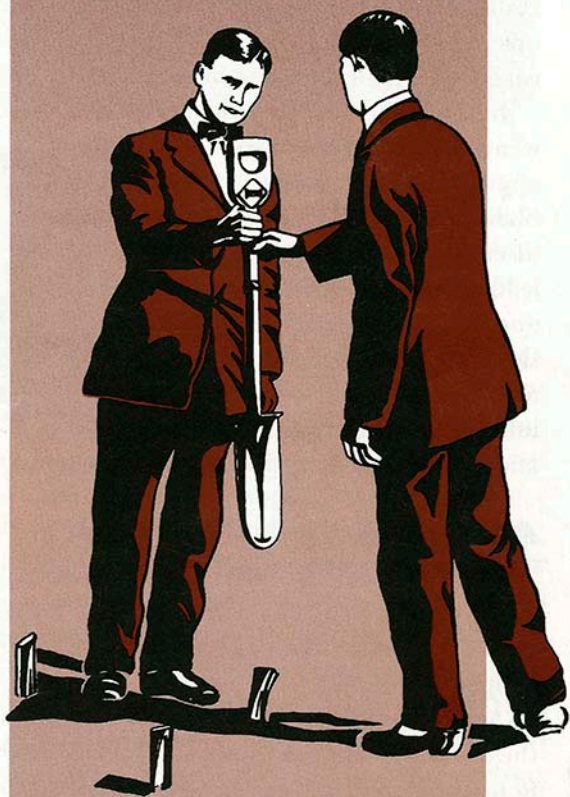
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# SHERIDAN HALL



THE MAKING OF HISTORY

# THE HISTORY OF SHERIDAN HALL

## THE FORTRESS OF THE PLAINS

by Bob Lowen  
(January, 1993)

Construction of Sheridan Coliseum began in 1915 and was completed in late 1916. The first major event in the building occurred in March of 1917. The facility was built at a cost of approximately \$125,000.

William A. Lewis, President of Fort Hays Kansas Normal School in Hays (1913-1933), was primarily responsible for the eventual construction of the "Large auditorium and classroom building which could also serve as a gymnasium, livestock pavilion and show place."

The only legislative appropriation for a building for any state school in 1915 went to Fort Hays Kansas Normal. That building was Sheridan Coliseum.





## **POLITICAL GAMES**

Sheridan Coliseum was approved and built as the result of a political feud in Topeka. The democratic senate in 1915 usually was apathetic to any bill passed by the republican-controlled house. The new governor was Arthur Capper, who had defeated democratic Governor George Hodges. Late in February, the house included in House Bill 1087 an appropriation of \$125,000 for regular maintenance and for the construction of Sheridan Coliseum. The senate combined the bill with others into Senate Bill 1086 and increased all house appropriations. If Gov. Capper approved the increased funding, he would spend more than democratic Governor Hodges, and the republicans were not known as spenders.

The senate held the bill until three days before the end of the session. The republican majority in the house, with no chance for a lower appropriation bill, passed the bill and sent it to Capper and urged him to blue line the excesses of the democrats. Capper slashed from the budget the buildings for other institutions, but the senate had lumped the Fort Hays general appropriations together with enough funds to build the new coliseum.

Under Kansas law, the Governor could only approve or drop an appropriation; he could neither increase nor decrease it. To blue line the Fort Hays appropriation would be to discontinue the school; to approve the bulk appropriation would give the school a building in one lump appropriation. Capper had no choice. The democrats had given Fort Hays and western Kansas a multi-use classroom and gymnasium building.

## CAPACITY CROWDS

During its 69 years of use (1917-1986), Sheridan Coliseum's 2,000 permanent seats were filled many times for a variety of events. In fact, it didn't take long after completion of the building to fill with people what some legislators in 1916 had termed "The White Elephant of Western Kansas."

Every seat in the house and hundreds on the floor were occupied when Fort Hays music teacher Henry Edward Malloy presented "Il Travatore" on March 23, 1917, at the grand opening of the new "Fortress of the Plains."



Sheridan Coliseum became a showplace for all of western Kansas for conventions, music festivals, concerts, drama productions, athletic events and commencement exercises.

In 1917, the building was without equal in western Kansas and was the grandest facility of its kind between Kansas City and Denver.

## INSIDE THE OLD STRUCTURE

Through the years, Sheridan Coliseum housed dozens of departments and offices. In 1986, the remaining few offices in the building, including the President's, moved out so that renovation of the facility into a performing arts center and administrative office building could begin. Many of the departments that had survived in cramped quarters for years in the building, such as nursing, and health, physical education and recreation, had moved earlier to new, spacious facilities.

In March, 1991, many administrative offices returned to the coliseum to new, beautiful facilities.



## ATHLETICS WERE KING

Although wrestling and gymnastics meets were also held in the coliseum, the most popular spectator sport was basketball. Paul B. Gross was responsible for creating basketball mania early on and then in the late 1940s and 1950s, Cade Suran was the architect of a new and exciting brand of run-and-gun basketball.

Tiger games in the coliseum regularly drew huge, noisy crowds. In fact, students and other would-be-ticket buyers, willingly stood in long lines at the ticket gate several hours before game time. People fortunate enough to get inside the coliseum early would study, visit, play cards, eat brown-bag dinners, consume soft drinks, and otherwise prepare to help their beloved Tigers do battle on the hardwoods of the "Snakepit."

More than 500 college basketball games and countless high school games were played during the 56-year existence of the basketball portion of the coliseum. The first basketball game was played during the fall of 1917, the last during the spring of 1973.





## STAR PERFORMERS

Star performers from throughout the world shared their talents on the stage at the coliseum. On May 8, 1922, when the world-famous opera star Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink performed the final concert of a five-day, Henry Malloy musical extravaganza, the crowd was so large that some spectators sat on chairs added to the platform from which Schumann-Heink worked.

Some of the hundreds of famous performers who appeared in the coliseum included opera stars Margaret Matzenaner, Julia Claussen, Ernest Davis and Rosa Ponselle; trumpeter Al Hirt; Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell; actors Basil Rathbone and James Whitmore; the Stan Kenton, Jan Garber, Tex Beneke, Duke Ellington and Woody Herman Orchestras; The Lettermen and the Four Freshmen singing groups; The National Ballet of Canada and the Ballet Russe De Monte Carlo; The Goldovsky Opera Company and the Fujiwara Opera Company; pianists Ferrante and Teicher, Van Cliburn, and Peter Nero; Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra; The New York Philharmonic Orchestra; The Leonard Bernstein Gala; The Budapest and Minneapolis Symphonies; several military bands; violinist Isaac Stern; The Vienna Boys Choir; controversial lawyer William Kuntzler; singers Mahalia Jackson, Mac Davis and Harry Belafonte, and dancers Marge and Gower Champion.



## SHERIDAN'S FUTURE

There was limited discussion about the future of Sheridan Coliseum during the 1970s. A few administrative offices remained in the old, but structurally-sound facility.

When old, worn-out Rarick Hall was demolished in 1978 to make room for a new, modern Rarick Hall, some alumni, students, faculty and staff were upset that the historic structure was razed. Talk of razing Sheridan Coliseum brought similar emotion.

In the late 1970s, President Gerald W. Tomanek went on record vigorously opposed to demolishing Sheridan. In 1980, after lengthy discussion with legislative leaders, faculty, students, staff, and alumni, Tomanek decided that Fort Hays State University would renovate the old facility into a Student Service Center and Performing Arts Center.



## A MAJOR FUND DRIVE

University officials went to Topeka in 1982 and asked for \$4,012,000 in state funds for renovation of Sheridan Coliseum and construction of the proposed facility.

Approval was granted by the legislature on the condition that the University raise \$2,000,000 in private funds to help offset construction costs for the Performing Arts Center. The official kickoff for the drive, the largest fund raising project ever undertaken by the University up to that time, occurred on Oct. 6, 1984, at Homecoming. Fort Hays State University graduates Bob Schmidt, General Manager of KAYS Inc., and Norbert Dreiling, local attorney, agreed to co-chair the drive.

The first \$1.5 million was raised easily but the remaining three-quarters of a million dollars were more difficult to find. The drive temporarily bogged down.

## WORK BEGINS

In the meantime, there was sufficient state and private funding available that in 1987 renovation on the building began. The stone on the facility was cleaned and repaired and new windows installed. In 1988, the interior was gutted and support piling placed. The next phase of construction included the building of walls and floors, plumbing, electrical rough-ins, and the installation of two elevators. Then came the pouring of concrete for the Performing Arts Center floors. However, by the end of that year construction slowed because of an error in funding that took place in Topeka and because of the lack of private funding for the Arts Center.

## TIME CATCHES UP

It became apparent in the late 1960s, when enrollment at Fort Hays Kansas State College began to increase rapidly, that Sheridan Coliseum was no longer adequate to fulfill the needs of a changing campus society.

Basketball crowds outgrew the limited seating, students asked for a larger facility for concerts, better acoustics were desirable for musical and drama productions, additional office space was a must, and departments housed in the nostalgic old structure were rapidly overflowing their quarters.

By 1970, Sheridan Coliseum was quickly becoming functionally obsolete, particularly in terms of life safety codes, handicap accessibility and energy conservation standards.

Past and present students, faculty and staff, and friends of the University loved the old facility. Its historic significance to the campus and to western Kansas was immeasurable. When first constructed, Sheridan was the finest, largest facility of its kind in western Kansas. But that was in 1917 when enrollment at the University was 417 students.

## TIME TO BUILD

President M.C. Cunningham (1949-69) began the dream for a new facility to succeed Sheridan Coliseum. Cunningham's successor, John W. Gustad (1969-76), agreed. Gustad followed the advice of many people and eventually decided that the University would construct two new buildings together, one designed especially for indoor athletic events, the other an all-purpose learning and recreational facility.

Construction on Gross Memorial Coliseum, named for former basketball coach and athletic director Paul B. Gross, and Cunningham Hall, named in memory of President Cunningham, began in 1971, was completed in 1973, and was financed mainly by a special student fee.

## A FANTASTIC GESTURE

On April 11, 1990, the completion of the renovation was guaranteed.

Ross and Marianna Beach and Bob and Pat Schmidt of Hays gave FHSU President Edward H. Hammond a check for \$750,000. Because of their generosity, the Performing Arts Center within the coliseum was named in their honor.

Following the Beach-Schmidt gesture, the legislature corrected the funding error in Topeka and money was made available for construction to continue. Finish work was begun and the laying of carpet, painting, the installing of chairs in the Beach/Schmidt Performing Arts Center, and all phases of the final touches on the renovated structure were underway. Official rededication ceremonies took place Feb. 9, 1991, and featured then Kansas Gov. Joan Finney. When all the dust had cleared and inflation had taken its toll, the total cost of renovation was more than \$8 million.

Besides the beautiful Beach/Schmidt Performing Arts Center, Sheridan is also the home of several administrative offices, including the University President; Provost; Vice Presidents for Business, Institutional Advancement, and Student Affairs; Registrar; Placement; Continuing Education, and University Relations.

## NAME CHANGE

In 1990, university officials received permission from the Kansas Board of Regents to change the name of Sheridan Coliseum to Sheridan Hall.





