

Story, video: 'Training school' alums unveil Swart marker, share memories

by Alex Hummel - Saturday, October 22, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/14940/training-school-alums-unveil-swart-marker-share-memories/>

Claud Thompson remembers dropping “water bombs” out of the school’s upper story windows and “terrorizing” student teachers by making them think he and his chums had read and comprehended advanced fiction novels.

It was Thompson’s elementary school after all, and, like most others, it harbored its share of harmless mischief.

“I have many, many fond memories of this place,” said Thompson, behind a podium inside the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh’s Swart Hall as an idyllic fall morning light streaked in over a small, smiling audience on Oct 22. “In Kindergarten, we used to have a tricycle that we’d zoom around in in the Kindergarten room.”

The “training school” or “campus school,” as alums and Oshkosh residents like Thompson and Susy Vette call it, wasn’t just home to hijinx. Students also remember the innovative teacher-training methods their school, its unique environments and the developing teachers within exposed them to.

“In fourth grade, we studied French,” said Vette, who counted herself lucky to have attended the school after moving with her family from Chicago to Oshkosh as a child. “And I suspect we were the only fourth graders in 1950, maybe in America, who started the day with “Alouette” or “Frere Jacques.”

Theirs was a “laboratory school,” the first ever in the United States to embed a kindergarten inside a public college known for its teacher preparation programs. Today, the “college” is UW Oshkosh. But, at its birth 140 years ago, it was the Oshkosh Normal School. And on Homecoming Saturday, Oct. 22, a small band of unique alums – elementary students, teachers and school administrators -- gathered to unveil the historical plaque that marks Swart Hall as the long-lasting home of an educational innovation.

“The first Kindergarten in a public university in America was really our first national first in a long legacy of national firsts,” UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells said during the Swart Hall dedication ceremony.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63eFQoq3Q-Q>

A few dozen former students, teachers and UW Oshkosh educational leaders gathered Oct. 22 for the Swart Hall historical marker dedication. It’s the second established at UW Oshkosh, following February’s dedication of the “Black Thursday,” historical marker, listing the names of 94 students who were expelled from the University in 1968 after their list of demands, including more fair treatment by faculty and administrators, new African-American history and literature courses and better housing options, triggered protests.

Swart Hall, named after Rose C. Swart, a teaching education innovator who wove practice teaching into the Oshkosh Normal School's programs in 1872, was not the original location for the first-ever kindergarten in a public teacher-training college. The Kindergarten began in the basement of the long extinct Normal School building.

But when Swart Hall was built in 1928, the Kindergarten and additional grades and classrooms moved in. There, the public school and public university program that used it as a laboratory for teacher education thrived for decades.

"It was characteristic of an ultramodern new school building that had been built back in the 1920s," said Thompson, who in addition to being one of its Kindergarten alumni also taught in Swart. "We even had our Kindergarten bathroom with small fixtures and all that stuff."

Swart's in-house school was phased out in the 1970s as teacher-training shifted to an exclusively off-campus model – the model that continues in student teaching collaborations in school districts throughout Wisconsin today.

UW Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services Dean Fred Yeo led off the Oct. 22 dedication ceremony by noting that he had first heard references to the first Kindergarten laboratory school when he was a graduate student in North Carolina.

Yeo said he remembers vague references to the innovation taking root in the upper Midwest. He never knew he'd end up leading the teacher-preparation program where it all began.

"And low and behold, here we are," he said.

UW Oshkosh COEHS Assistant Professor Wendy Strauch-Nelson shared some history on the pioneering women who first came to the Normal School and participated in the Kindergarten teaching program. They quickly became "priestesses" of their craft, admired not only in educational circles but also in the community.

"And I think what is significant is the citizens of Oshkosh welcomed these priestesses and gave them the opportunity to hone their teaching skills, to develop their expertise," Strauch-Nelson said. "They all went on to do wonderful things with their experiences here, and they trained additional Kindergartners along the way."

Read more:

- [Engage online: There is a Future for Teachers](#)
- [Engage online: Parallels with the Past](#)