Van Raalte In Ruins; Van Vleck Saved

Two major fires within a week during late April on the Hope College campus destroyed Van Raalte Hall, the central administrative building, and heavily damaged Van Vleck Hall, the oldest structure on campus.

Miraculously, there were no injuries reported to students, faculty or staff members in either fire. Damage from the fires was placed at $1.5 million.

The first fire on April 21 caused major damage to the 132-year-old Van Vleck residence hall for women which was in the final stages of a restoration project. The second fire in the early hours of April 28 left the 78-year-old Van Raalte a smoldering ruins. The devastation was so complete that within hours of the fire a wrecker's crane was brought to the scene to knock down the walls that formed a shell of a building.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A special four page edition of News from Hope College reporting the Van Vleck blaze was ready to go to press when the Van Raalte fire
Van Raalte Destroyed

Continued from preceding page

The cause of the pre-dawn Van Raalte fire was not immediately determined. It was discovered by a maintenance man at approximately 5 a.m. First arriving firemen said flames were already shooting from the windows of several first floor offices. The fire quickly spread to an open stairwell and raced to the fourth story attic where it enveloped the wooden roof.

The fire was visible from several miles and for a while threatened the nearby Dimnent Memorial Chapel which is only 25 feet west of Van Raalte Hall. Firemen played several hoses between the buildings to protect the chapel.

Ashes rising through an early morning drizzle threatened nearby residences, campus buildings and Western Theological Seminary. Police and student volunteers patrolled the area and stood on rooftops to prevent any additional fires.

Within two hours only the walls remained. Firemen were on the scene throughout the day pouring thousands of gallons of water on the debris.

The building contained the offices of most administrative departments, including the president, provost, registrar, dean of students, business manager, alumni, financial aid, development and information services.

Almost all of the college's "hard" student, financial and alumni records were stored in Van Raalte.

However, all academic records of former students had been placed on microfilm and stored elsewhere while the records of current students were kept on the college's computer in another building.

The fate of many other records stored in file cabinets and a basement vault was not immediately determined.

A crane began probing the ruins the same day of the fire and grabbed several file cabinets. Amazingly, the contents in many of the cabinets remained intact although wet and heat stained. Among items retrieved was an estimated $40,000 from a safe and irreplaceable business office ledgers.

Among items lost were tickets for the May 11 Commencement exercise which were to be distributed to seniors on the day of the fire. Fortunately, copy for the Commencement program had already gone to the printer.

For the second time in a week Saga, the college's food service, provided meals and refreshments for firefighters and volunteers. They were joined by the local Holland Salvation Army.

The food service even "catered" a hot meal in the Van Raalte Hall parking lot to feed crews involved in salvage work.

"We have been inconvenienced, but we're not out of business," noted William Anderson, vice president for finance.

"People are going to have to be patient with us for awhile until we can rebuild our files."

The loss of Van Raalte will cause college officials to re-think the campus development plan. The long-range plan had been to phase-out Van Raalte in favor of a new administration center since renovation of the building would have been too costly.

However, that project was still several years away since the college had recently given priority to renovating Voorhees Hall as a residence hall for women.

President Gordon Van Wylen said the college's Board of Trustees would examine options during its Spring meeting on campus May 8-9.
Fire Ravages Historic Van Vleck Hall; Repair of Oldest Building Underway

Historic Van Vleck Hall was extensively damaged by fire Monday, April 21 as painters were putting the finishing touches on a $400,000 restoration of the oldest building on the Hope College campus.

There were no injuries among the 33 women who lived in the building.

Painters were working on the exterior of the building in anticipation of a May 10 Alumni Day rededication of the 123-year-old structure.

Officials believe flames from a propane torch being used by a contract painter to remove paint from the eaves of the three-story-tall building started the fire shortly after 11 a.m.

Two Hope College employees, Adrian Van Houten and Barney Poppema, saw smoke coming from the building, notified the fire department and then went door-to-door to alert residents of the blaze.

The fire, fed by the century-old wooden timbers, raced through the attic despite the heroic efforts of firemen.

Students and members of the college staff assisted firefighters in carrying hoses, raising ladders and placing tarps over furniture and personal belongings of the residents.

At one point several volunteers braved smoke and cascading water from firemen’s hoses to empty all the rooms on the first floor. These items were taken to nearby Carnegie-Schouw gymnasium.

College employees removed the remaining personal belongings of the residents from the building within eight hours of the fire.

The fire burned out of control for more than an hour as several hundred onlookers watched flames break through the roof on the north side of the building. Four firemen suffered minor injuries.

Fire damage was limited to the roof, attic and portions of three rooms on the third floor. The rest of the building suffered water and smoke damage.

Within 24 hours college officials announced that Van Vleck would be reconstructed. There did not appear to be any serious structural damage to the brick building. Workmen were rebuilding the roof only two days after the fire.

Preliminary estimates of damage to the building and personal property of the students ranged from $300,000 to $500,000. The loss was expected to be covered by insurance.

The students were provided alternate housing, either on campus or in the community. Offers to assist in helping replace items lost in the fire came from several Holland area businesses and civic groups.
Hope Even In Despair

Knowing of your keen interest in the renovation of Van Vleck Hall, we thought we should present as soon as possible a full account of the fire that occurred April 21, and the action we have taken to immediately begin to repair the damage and to complete the renovation.

Two things stand out as I reflect on this event. The first is the remarkable change in attitude from Monday, the day of the fire, to Tuesday. The mood of sadness and even despair that prevailed on Monday is understandable. Watching this historic building being consumed in flames was a shocking experience in itself. But to see the waterlogged contents from each room being removed and to think of the potential loss of a semester’s work and priceless moments, the disruption of moving to a new housing situation with just three weeks left in the semester, and the uncertainty of just how each student will cope, created an even deeper sense of concern, compassion and sadness.

But what an amazing change took place by Tuesday. Many concerns and hurts remained, of course. But, a remarkable number of residents were coping very maturely with the situation. By Tuesday morning, the decision was made to begin reconstruction immediately, and by late that afternoon, workmen were already on the job. The prevailing attitude was that this tragic and disruptive event would not deter us from fulfilling our individual and collective missions. We would indeed go forward even though we faced substantial difficulties.

The second impression that remains is the extraordinary way in which so many people in the College community rallied to help. Students and staff worked diligently to remove contents from the building while the fire was underway; the custodial and maintenance staff worked late into Monday evening to remove the contents of the building. Above all, fellow students were supportive in countless ways of each other in helping cope and recover from a very difficult situation. I believe you would be proud of the way the entire campus community, and particularly the residents, have conducted themselves in this difficult situation.

A ceremony of rededication of Van Vleck Hall had been scheduled for Alumni Day on May 10. We have decided to continue with the ceremony, but to change the focus from Van Vleck Hall to a dedication of ourselves to the mission of the College to accomplish God’s purposes of truth, grace, compassion and justice through this great institution. Thank you for your part in the work of the College. We hope that many of you will join us for this dedication service.

Gordon J. Van Wylen
President

news from
SPECIAL EDITION
HOPE
Published for Alumni, Friends and Parents of Hope College. Should you receive more than one copy, please pass it on to someone in your community. An overlap of Hope College constituencies makes duplication sometimes unavoidable.

Fiery

Many have said that Van Vleck Hall is a little wonder that by 1891 Van Vleck Hall was barely a building.

But Van Vleck survived all these incendiary acts. It is an amazing building that has touched by the great Holland fire of the city, including at least 200 developments. The fire spared the flames of that great fire and the preservation of the building was a miracle. The building is a symbol of the city of Holland.

Throughout its history in the late 19th century, the Fire Hall in the city was a dormitory, classroom building, and library. It was used for a long time as a library and a building for students and faculty.

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Every Fate

A story that ended in fire.

Van Vleck was heated by wood-burning stoves...
'Helpless and Hopeless'

These are the words sophomore Cari Beckman says came to mind as she and 32 other Van Vleck Hall residents watched their campus home being destroyed by fire.

Beckman, whose room was located on the fire-laned third floor of the 123-year-old residence hall, lost nearly all her belongings to fire, smoke and water. Her loss included some expensive items: a stereo, a TV, a small refrigerator and textbooks valued at $175 that she was using for this semester’s classes. But these aren’t the things she’s thinking about.

Beckman laments, instead, the irreplaceable personal items that don’t easily wear price tags: photographs, letters and some favorite old record albums from her extensive collections.

The passports of two residents were burned and one student craftswoman lost many pieces of needlework which represented hundreds of hours of stitching.

The day after the fire Cari Beckman told us she was ready to wash the persistent smoke odor from clothes that firefighters had managed to salvage, counted blessings and began to feel “a lot better” about the tragedy. Between washing machine loads, she started to make plans necessary to successfully complete the two remaining weeks of the current academic year.

“What’s on my mind most now is the loss of my books and the notes from all my classes, especially with exams being so close,” she said. “You can borrow someone else’s notes, but it’s never as good as using your own.”

She had turned in several major research papers during the preceding two weeks and was thus spared the loss of any papers in progress.

Registrar Jon Huisken, appointed to help students deal with any academic inconvenience resulting from the fire, said that Van Vleck residents are working out arrangements on an individual basis with their professors. He assures that professors are granting extensions on papers and exams if needed.

Beckman, whose parents live in Holland, plans to complete the year as commuting student. Other displaced fire victims were relocated in campus facilities.

“It would be nice if we could all still live together until the end of the year,” said Susan Ward, a second-floor Van Vleck resident who will finish the year living in Dykstra Hall.

Virtually all of Ward’s possessions survived the blaze. “I feel really lucky,” she said. Like most of the Van Vleck residents, the junior music major from Muskegon, Mich., was in class when the fire broke out. Happily, she had grabbed her cherished flute, needed for a lesson later in the day, when she had left her room early that morning. Often, she came back to Van Vleck at noon to drop off books and pick up her instrument before her lessons in nearby Nykerk Hall of Music.

“It was such a sad thing to watch,” she recalls. “At first, we weren’t even thinking about losing our things. It was just so sad to watch our nice, favorite-place-to-live being destroyed.”

Ward is grateful to her classmates from other dorms who came to the rescue of the distraught Van Vleck residents. Not only were they supplied with necessities, such as toothbrushes and clothes to wear to class the next day; they were also given posters and other items for decorating their new quarters.

Sophomore Chris Van Eyl says she waited years to live in Van Vleck.

“My mother told me Van Vleck was a favorite when she went there in the ’50s. My older sister lived here when she went to Hope. And I’ve been waiting for years until I could live here too.”

Van Eyl said she felt “incredibly helpless” while watching firefighters battle the blaze. Her father, psychology professor Phillip Van Eyl, helped cover students’ possessions with tarp to prevent firemen battling the flames.

Van Vleck Head Resident Mary Aulderheide, a teacher in nearby Hamilton, hadn’t reported in at school on Monday because of illness. She was in her nightgown when the cry of “Fire!” rouged her from her first-floor apartment.

Standing outside with her gathering undergraduate charges, Aulderheide’s first observation was that damages weren’t going to be too bad.

That soon became wishful thinking, however, and 33 Hope women, who had moved into newly renovated quarters last fall with great anticipation, now add their unique memories to the rich legacy of historic Van Vleck Hall.
Campus Workhorse

Throughout its 78 years, Van Raalte Hall was the workhorse of the Hope College campus. Completed in 1903, the red brick building was a "no frills" design when compared to the nearby ornate, stone Graves Hall completed just nine years earlier. Within a few decades, Van Raalte's utilitarian image was heightened when the imposing gothic Dimnent Memorial Chapel was erected directly to the west. And in its more recent history, Van Raalte did not fare gracefully. Its roof leaked perennially, its windows were drafty, and its heating system only rarely could be regulated to "just right" conditions. College officials planned to eventually tear down the building and build a new administrative center after more pressing campus facility needs had been met. But most administrators believed that move was at least 10 years away. And so, in the meantime, Van Raalte was patched together and given a few face lifts — and everybody assumed the building would continue to serve until the College would decide it was no longer needed.

Despite the fact that architecturally Van Raalte had limited value as a landmark when compared to Van Vleck Hall (1857), Graves Hall (1894) or Voorhees Hall (1907), it nevertheless was considered by some to be historically significant because it was built in memory of Hope's founder, the Rev. A. C. Van Raalte, and the pioneers who helped found the Holland colony in 1847. Van Raalte Hall was envisioned by former Hope President Gerrit Kollen (1893-1911) as "a building that shall declare to the world our love for and appreciation of the fathers and mothers who, filled with zeal, faith and hope, laid the foundations upon which we are privileged to build."

"In losing Van Raalte Hall, we've lost that vital link to the College's founder," says Dr. Elton Bruins, professor of religion and Hope historian, while acknowledging that the restoration of Van Vleck and Voorhees were wiser foci for the College to adopt.

From Bruins' perspective as an historian, one of the greatest potential losses of the Van Raalte fire is the papers of current President Gordon J. Van Wylen.

Completed at a cost of $29,000 ($10,000 of which was finally borrowed from the endowment fund because of disappointing response to donation appeals), Van Raalte met a pressing need on campus for science classrooms and laboratories. The departments of chemistry and physics were housed on the first floor, with general classrooms and biology labs on the second floor. A portion of the third floor was set aside for a museum to commemorate the pioneers of 1847.

The founder's son, D. B. K. Van Raalte participated in cornerstone laying ceremonies in 1902 and Professor of Music J. B. Nykerk composed a special memorial hymn for the occasion.

The building was dedicated as Van Raalte Memorial Hall, but came to be known simply as Van Raalte Hall.

During World War I, the third floor was turned into a mess hall for a unit of the Student Army Training Corps present on Hope's campus.

In the early 1920s, the fourth floor was finished to house the displaced museum. The museum came to be neglected and nearly forgotten until the 1960s and 1970s, when Hope students and Bruins rediscovered and retrieved all of its colorful class banners and old class photos which now hang in the DeWitt Student and Cultural Center.

A new science building was completed in 1941 (which was remodeled in 1975 as Lubbers Hall for the Humanities and Social Sciences) and the Van Raalte laboratories then afforded much needed additional classroom space. Soon after Irwin J. Lubbers became president in 1945, he had offices carved out of several classrooms in the building, thereby providing the first faculty offices on campus as well as offices for the College's growing administration.

Among the best remembered features of Van Raalte was the "Klooz" coffee shop located in the basement. Also in the basement was the College bookstore. Both these student gathering spots were relocated when the DeWitt Center opened in 1971.

In the late 1960s concerns were first raised regarding Van Raalte's potential fire dangers as a classroom facility. The collapse of a second floor ceiling in Nov., 1972, hastened the decision to transform the building into an office center.

In recent years Van Raalte housed all Hope's administrative offices except the Admissions Office. The top two floors were not in use.
Time to Rebuild

For Hope administrators it was a long day of waiting. Not until late afternoon was a crane able to begin clearing through the rubble to spot twisted and charred file cabinets and desks, the contents or lack of contents of which will make a difference in the weeks and months ahead.

Had Van Raalte been devised by fire 25 years earlier, the results to College operations would have been far more devastating. Since the mid-1960s, however, most of the College's vital records have been computer-stored or duplicated on microfilm.

The academic records of all former students are on microfilm which is stored in an underground warehouse facility in Grand Rapids, where many general College records are also kept. The names, addresses, class years and other basic statistical information on all Hope's alumni, both living and dead, is secure in the Hope computer, as is much information related to development. It appears that one of the biggest potential losses in an insurance claim processes.

Placement records, including teacher credential records going back as far as the 1930s, may also be lost.

Alumni officials had assumed that all the individual files they maintain on alumni—manuscripts in any years were worth of newspaper and magazine clippings, photographs, completed questionnaires and correspondences—would be lost. However, as fire retardants began to find entrance to many of these files appeared to be only singed along the edges. It will take months of sorting to determine the extent of loss to these files.

Vice President for Business and Finance William A. Anderson was visibly relieved when the College's main ledger ("All of Hope College's records are two copies," according to one observer) was lifted out intact from a corner that had once been the Business Office's main sale.

College officials will continue to sort through the debris and no doubt the coming days will bring more words of encouragement and disappointments to administrators.

"Alumni can be assured that all their academic records are intact," says Diane Delius, assistant registrar. Although it will take some time to collect the records and transcript requests may take a little longer to fill, Delius assures that all records should be resumable without problem. All current student academic records, including registration data for the upcoming May, June, summer and fall terms, are programmed into the Hope computer. Although it may take a little longer for students to receive their official diplomas later in the summer, after final grades have been processed, Delius says. Commencement will take place without complications caused by the fire.

All events scheduled for Alumni Day on May 10 will take place as originally planned.

The Financial Aid Office faces especially pressing concerns related to their records. Fortunately, about 90% of the letters announcing financial aid awards to incoming freshmen were recently mailed. All incoming freshmen who have received letters are asked to make copies and mail them to Bruce Himebaugh, director, Financial Aid Office.

Inquiries regarding these grants must come from students, not institutions. The address is:

Bruce Himebaugh, director
Financial Aid Office
Hope College
Holland, MI 49423

Further, all students, both incoming freshmen and current students, who have received word that they are recipients of the federal government's Basic Educational Opportunity Grants are asked to write and request a duplicate Student Eligibility Report, one copy of which should then be sent to the Financial Aid Office.

Inquiries regarding these grants must come from students, not institutions. The address is:

Bruce Himebaugh, director
Financial Aid Office
Hope College
Holland, MI 49423

Hope's records of financial aid for next year to current students and transfer students may be lost, and while fire was still raging Himebaugh had already begun to make inquiries to the College Scholarship Service, which processes the Financial Aid Forms completed by all Hope students seeking aid. The agency retains copies of all forms received; however, these forms are filed by individuals, not institutions. Himebaugh reasonably estimated that Hope will be able to obtain a full set of forms needed. He and his staff will then be faced with the task of reissuing all forms for the past weeks, which involved studying the analysis of individual students' need as determined by the College Scholarship Service and then deciding on the financial aid packages Hope would offer.

Records of financial aid loans are kept on computer at a university accounting service based in Milwaukee. While the billing and receiving of these loans.

Contributions sent to the College during the week of April 21 might have been destroyed. If you do not receive a reply by May 1, please contact the Development Office. If you have sent a pledge for the Voorhees project during the week of April 21, please contact Cindy Paddock in the Development Office.

Grocery bags temporarily became college's small room in gameroom of DeVries Center.

Hot News

Pictured in the Office of Information Services at the height of the fire that destroyed Van Raalte Hall on April 28. It illustrates the extent of damage to many of the college's historical documents such as yearbooks, alumni magazines, and pictures. Copies of most of these items are also preserved in the College Archives in Van Zoeren Library, but in many cases we now only have one copy of these items. Future issues of News From Hope College will announce how you might help as by donating items of historical importance to the college.

Tom Remer, Editor