An American School Emerges

The changes which took place during the early years appear, in retrospect, to have come swiftly. Many students, after the school had moved to Iowa, walked the fifty miles from McGregor to Decorah; but this traverse became only a memory when the railroad crossed the Mississippi and was extended to Calmar and western Iowa. Even the bumpy wagon ride which students, seated on their trunks, took from Conover to Decorah was relegated to the past when a spur of the railroad was constructed to Decorah in 1869.

Many a young man in the early days came dressed in homespun; "store clothes" were a later development. Quite a few students were relatively new arrivals from Norway, often with a fair educational background from the mother country, but with little knowledge of English and little understanding of American conditions. For these a year or two at the college to reorient themselves was frequently all that was desired. Some of the students came from older, more established settlements. Thus, in 1874-75, a contingent of five came from Chicago, says one alumnus, "readily distinguished from the other students because of their neat and well fitting clothes, the cut of their

hair, evidently by a professional barber, not by Nils Flaten at 5¢ per cut, and that indefinite air of the large city, which the Romans referred to as *frons urbana*."

Almost imperceptibly from day to day the school changed. It changed just as the countryside and the social structure about it changed. The frontier was always a moving, flexible thing; it rapidly left northeastern Iowa behind and swept ever westward. As it moved on, the settlements in its wake took on the characteristics of older communities. Luther College, too, changed and gradually lost some of the features of its pioneer beginnings.

The problem of training men to go on to theological study, which had seemed paramount to most of the early founders of the institution, was no longer so urgent. Most of the early graduates had gone into the ministry. Out of 128 graduates from 1866 to 1881, ninety became clergymen. In addition, a considerable number who did not take an A. B. degree went on to theological study and became pastors. To a considerable extent, the needs of the parish ministry had been met.

The other thirty-eight graduates up to 1881 had entered a variety of fields, some going on to graduate study and entering the professions. These men were fulfilling the hopes of those who from the beginning had envisioned the college not solely as a place for pre-theological study, but as a

school for all the young people of the church. But it was to take years before this idea came to full fruition.

The early leaders spoke of the school as a "university," and the funds raised for the institution were known for more than twenty years as the "University Fund." This "university" was to consist of the college proper — a six-year course leading to the B. A. degree; a teachers' training department to give special training to prospective teachers, especially prospective parish teachers; and, to cap the educational structure, a seminary with a three-year course in theological studies to prepare men for the ministry. This was the original plan.

A two-year teachers' training department was organized in 1865. Subsequently, the course was lengthened to three years. The first graduates of the three-year normal course went out in 1871. But, although considerable effort was expended on the department, it was never popular, and attendance languished. It was discontinued in 1886.

The college had close ties with the Missouri Synod, whose headquarters were in St. Louis, Missouri. Early graduates of the college were sent to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for three years of theological study. For a variety of reasons, the arrangement was not wholly satisfactory. In 1876 the Norwegian Synod decided to establish its own theological seminary. Although

there were still proponents of the original plan of organizing the seminary at Decorah as part of the "university idea" (as was done by the Swedes at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois), other influences prevailed. The decision was perhaps motivated largely by two practical considerations: Luther College was already crowded and unable to house all its students; and a large orphanage in Madison, Wisconsin, which stood vacant, was immediately available. The seminary therefore was located not at Decorah, but at Madison. Thus the original "university idea" was considerably curtailed, and by the mid-1880's it was clear that Luther was on the way to becoming a typical American college.

In 1881 the course of study was lengthened from six to seven years. More time was needed, it was felt, to prepare men adequately for future study. President Larsen stated explicitly that the objective was to increase the requirements for graduation; he was also aware of the need for more science courses. Moreover, the increased requirements were in line with a general tightening up of college curriculums as the Middle West became a more settled society. Pioneer conditions were a thing of the past. The college had to keep abreast of the times and make its curriculum equal to the best found in similar institutions.

The change was further implemented by making the three lowest classes into a separate prepar-

atory department in 1889. Eventually a fourth year was added. But with the development of high schools throughout the area, the need of a preparatory department disappeared; and eventually, but only over the protests of its supporters, the department was discontinued in 1928. Long before this, however, it had lost the importance attached to it in the early years.

Meanwhile, many other developments were making the institution an American college rather than a transplanted Latin school. Music was a part of its curriculum in its very first year. Gradually music won a large place among the extra-curricular student activities. The first vocal group was organized in 1869, the first orchestra in 1877, and the first band in 1878. Music has ever since attracted many of the most talented students. The early organizations soon began to make public appearances, and gradually they won an outstanding position on campus. The best known is the Luther College Concert Band, which has toured from coast to coast at home and made three international tours to Europe.

Baseball early assumed first place among college sports. Originally it was played between teams representing rival groups in the student body. The first organized college nine of record dates from 1872. Occasionally games were played with town teams from Decorah, Waukon, Ridgeway, Fort Atkinson, and Cresco, the major contest

usually being the one with Decorah on May 17, the Norwegian national holiday which corresponds to the American July 4. In 1891 intercollegiate contests were introduced. These stirred tremendous interest and led to the first extensive tour by a Luther ball club in 1893. On its trip the team did not lose a game. The *Iowa Daily Citizen* (Iowa City) for May 9, 1893, in its account of one of the games with the State University of Iowa, stated:

> Nine baseball players, one substitute and a manager, all of Norwegian descent, came in on the night train Saturday, and put up at the St. James. On Sunday they sat around the lobby of the hotel, looking curiously at all the diamond-front traveling men; and when the church bells rang, found their way, as was their custom, to a place of worship. Two of them, the toughs of the party, smoked cigarettes, and one of them was so far gone, in their eyes, as to smoke a cigar.
>
> Several times the manager was approached with a view to ascertaining what he thought of the playing qualities of his team. . . . He did not care to talk baseball, nor did any of the team. But when they donned their old-fashioned red uniforms and took their place at the bat or in the field, they played ball, and that with terrific effect. . . .
>
> They went at it in such a matter-of-fact manner that it was really amusing to watch them. When the game was finished, they gathered up their bats — three in number — and quietly found their way to the hotel. They raised not a cry of triumph, not even as much as raised their hats.

The 12-0 Luther victory seemed a bit incredible

and the Iowa team invited the visitors to stay over for a second game. A telephone call was put through to President Larsen, an administrator not easily stirred by student extracurricular activities, and surprisingly enough, permission was given. The second game went into the ninth inning with the university leading 3 to 0. Then Luther batted in 8 runs. Speculation arose as to whether these Norwegians were some strange breed of supermen who had been playing possum up to that inning.

Of course the university has long since evened the series with Luther. Oscar L. Olson, first baseman, who later became president of Luther College, has stated that the members of the team were not so naive as the news article indicated. The incident, however, has gone down as one of the colorful legends associated with the long history of baseball at the college.

In 1877, through the influence of the English colony in Decorah, a modified form of English rugby and soccer football was introduced. It flourished until 1891 when the American game was introduced. But intercollegiate football was banned in 1897; intramural football still continued. The intercollegiate game was not officially resumed until 1919.

In 1886 when the first gymnasium was completed, turning became popular; it has flourished ever since that date. In 1891 the first tennis court

was made ready, but there is no record of intercollegiate matches until 1904. Track events interested students in an informal way, but the first organized field meet was not held until 1900 and the first intercollegiate meet two years later.

In 1892 the Luther College Athletic Association was organized. From time to time modifications have been made in its structure, but its main outlines have remained. Fundamentally, the formation of the society was a recognition of the maturity of college athletics and of their place in the college's total program. This was a development the early founders could hardly have envisioned, for it was a move quite foreign to the Latin school concept of their European background which had served as a measuring rod in the past.

Various literary, debating, and social societies flourished. Some had "Journals," handwritten, that attracted considerable attention. Some used the Norwegian language, some English. Several built up considerable libraries for the use of their members, most of these eventually being incorporated into the college library.

The most famous of the societies was, characteristically enough, Niffelheim. This group, which flourished from 1874 to 1889, developed, says one of its members, into a "republic" of free souls devoted to Lady Nicotine, protectress of the more daring who sought liberation from the rather rigid routine of school rules.

Niffelheim was the first society to introduce daily papers and weekly and monthly magazines at Luther College. She was the first society to inaugurate trial by jury and regular court proceedings. . . . Do you call to mind how we replenished our treasury by producing the very first small original farce written at Luther College? . . . And the famous court cases we had! I remember one especially of how a certain member refusing to pay a fine for having expectorated wildly was in due course sued by the members of the cabinet. The lawyers were the most illustrious men at the college. . . . Do you remember how we at one time felt almost convinced that the jury had been bribed? It seems to me that my ears ring even now with the oratorical denouncements uttered on that occasion.

How did we not willingly contribute part of our small means — and indeed we were not rich in those days — toward securing the first cheap carpet at twenty-five cents per yard and curtains of coarse texture, but neat design? We were the first clubroom to have a carpet and curtains. . . . And the feasts we had once or twice a year. . . . The members of the faculty that were smokers were always invited and we indeed felt proud when they deigned to be present. There in Niffelheim we met even the professors under a democratic flag.

These literary and social groups offered an outlet for student initiative and energy. Here were introduced the new ideas that were abroad in the college students' world. The new was constantly challenging the old.

Journalism in one form or another appealed strongly to students. Five years after the college opened, a handwritten sheet called *Moderlandet* (The Motherland) appeared. This was promptly

parodied by *Mamalandet* (The Mamaland). Other early handwritten papers were *The Knight Without Fear or Reproach, The Fly,* and *Svein the Fearless.* In 1878, students sought permission to set up a press and publish a paper. But a faculty meeting held that "this was a dangerous experiment." So the matter dragged for several years.

At length, in 1884, *College Chips,* an English semi-monthly, appeared. Its title was taken, appropriately enough, from the regular student chore of sawing and splitting wood for the stoves which were the only means of heating the building. Its editors stated:

> English is now unquestionably the reigning language of Luther College. It is true, Norwegian is yet used almost equally as much in class as before; but English is the language generally spoken outside of class and English is almost exclusively the language of all our literary societies. English has constantly been gaining ascendancy and is now predominant. We regard this a change for the better.

Defending the issuance of the journal, the editors modestly said: "We have thought that a paper of this kind might possibly do something in promoting the interests of the college." They then called attention to the motto they had chosen: *Valeat quantum valere potest;* that is, "Let it pass for what it is worth." It was an auspicious start. *Chips* attracted an amazing degree of loyalty. It has now passed the three-quarter-century mark

and in its present newspaper form is more vigorous than ever.

Another step which clearly showed the Americanization taking place at the college was the formation on June 28, 1880, of that typically American organization — an alumni association. True, it was first given a Norwegian name, the Luther College Alumni *Forening*; but *forening* was soon changed to "association." In 1888 the society was incorporated under Iowa law to give it the proper status for handling funds. One of its first objects was to raise an endowment fund for the college. Over the years it has gradually assumed larger responsibilities in college affairs.

The language of the faculty minutes represented typically academic conservatism: the faculty clung to Norwegian until 1915. On the other hand after the college was incorporated under Iowa law in 1865, the minutes of the Board of Trustees were regularly kept in English. This dichotomy of language was found in many aspects of college life. Although Norwegian all but disappeared after World War I, tag ends of the language persist here and there, and many old Norwegian customs and traditions are still cherished.

In 1872 a *Katalog* was issued in Norwegian. It was the first catalog of the college, contained a brief history of the institution, a description of the facilities, a listing of the courses of study, and a complete roster of students from the opening of

the college in 1861. The second catalog was issued in 1883, this time in English. Thereafter it appeared annually until 1954. Apparently among the college constituency there was still a demand for information in Norwegian; accordingly, beginning in 1886 the catalog was issued in both English and Norwegian, a practice continued until 1906.

For more than fifty years no tuition was charged students in the college. The supporting church footed the bill for the school. But a tuition charge for every student in the preparatory department was made beginning in 1889. Meanwhile, to care for services which fell outside the regular budget, various fees were introduced, such as for medical care, music, the library, and the gymnasium. Some means had to be found, the administration discovered, to provide for matters that went beyond the budgets that were regarded as adequate in the first pioneer years.

On May 19, 1889, the Main Building was gutted by fire. Since this was the only major building, its destruction created a crisis. All students save seniors were sent home. During the next school year the college carried on in improvised quarters. Meanwhile, after some debate as to whether the school should be relocated elsewhere, Pastor U. V. Koren's influence was once more decisive, and a new structure was built on the old foundations. The new structure was far more pleasing in design

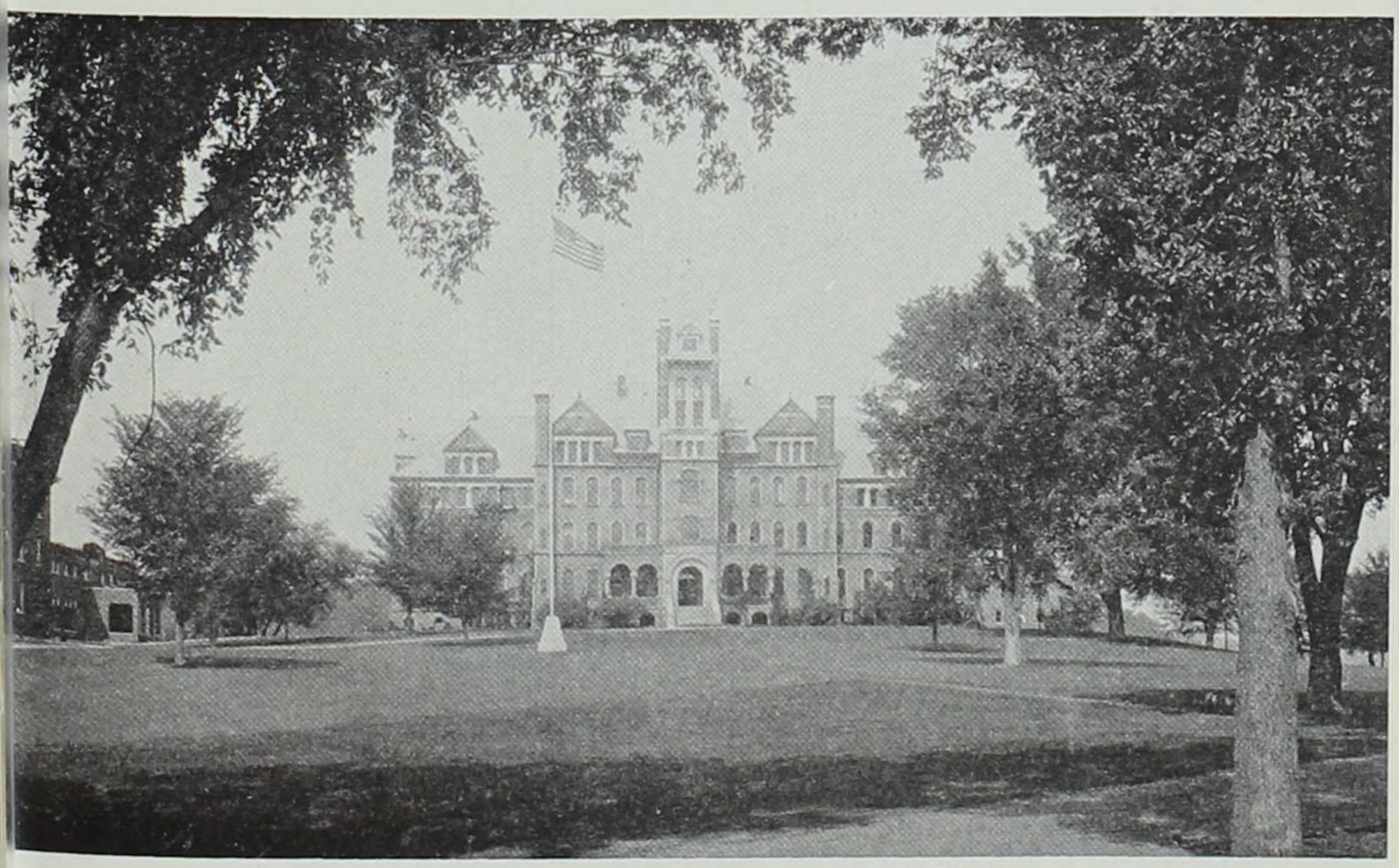
than the old and for fifty-two years remained a cherished landmark.

The city water mains were extended to the campus. A heating plant was built and steam heat replaced the old, dangerous, and inadequate stoves. Some years later, after the city of Decorah had acquired electric lights, electricity was brought to the campus. Through the efforts of the alumni the college in 1901 obtained its own electric power plant, which served for many years. In 1901 a small hospital building was erected.

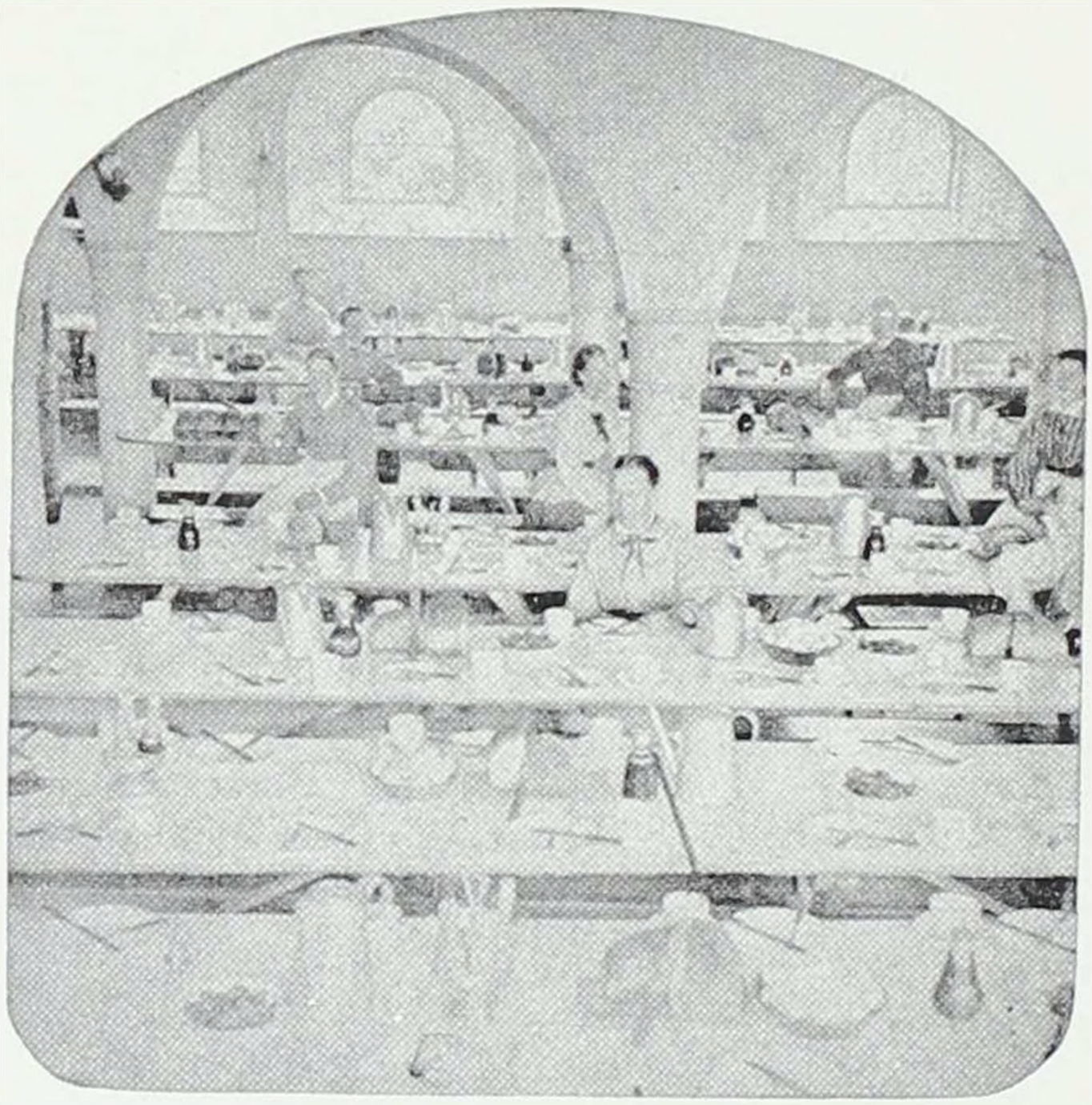
The library, for which an appropriation had been made in the first year of the college's existence, grew slowly but steadily. Students, toiling through the night, saved its 6,000 volumes when fire destroyed the Main Building. Its first printed catalog was issued about 1889. By 1902 it had more than 11,000 volumes. In 1899-1900 it was classified according to the Dewey decimal system; but in 1920 it was reorganized according to the Library of Congress classification system.

In 1877, the college received a gift of 600 birds' eggs. This became the nucleus of the large collection of articles now forming the Norwegian-American Historical Museum. The museum, which attracted little attention at first, began to find new support in the nineties. In this period, especially, the foundation was laid for the large, and now priceless, collection of Norwegian-American magazines and newspapers. These,

First Main Building. Photo taken in 1874 when the south wing (from the small tower at left) was dedicated.



Old Main. Destroyed by fire May 31, 1942.



Dining room in the basement of the first Main Building.

The Faculty in 1869.
Standing, L. to r.: Friedrich A. Schmidt and Nils O. Brandt.
Seated: Gabriel H. Landmark, Lyder Siewers, Knut E. Bergh, and Laur. Larsen.

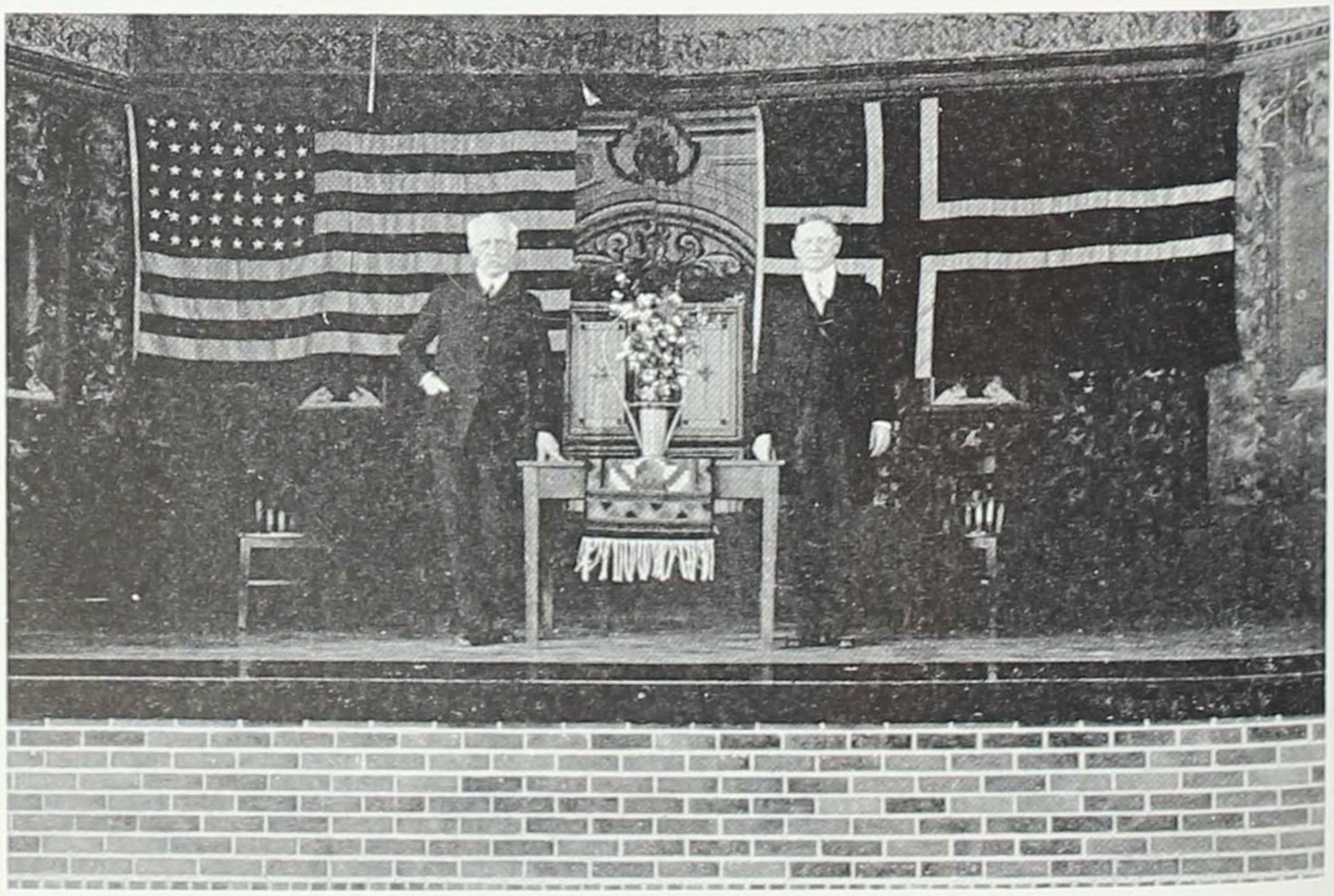
Comitia Dumriana, 1873-74.

Standing, l. to r.: Thora Larsen, Marie Reque, Margrethe Brandt, Emma Larsen, and Rosine Preus. *Seated:* Louise Hjort, Caroline Koren, Henriette Koren, and Mathilda Stub.

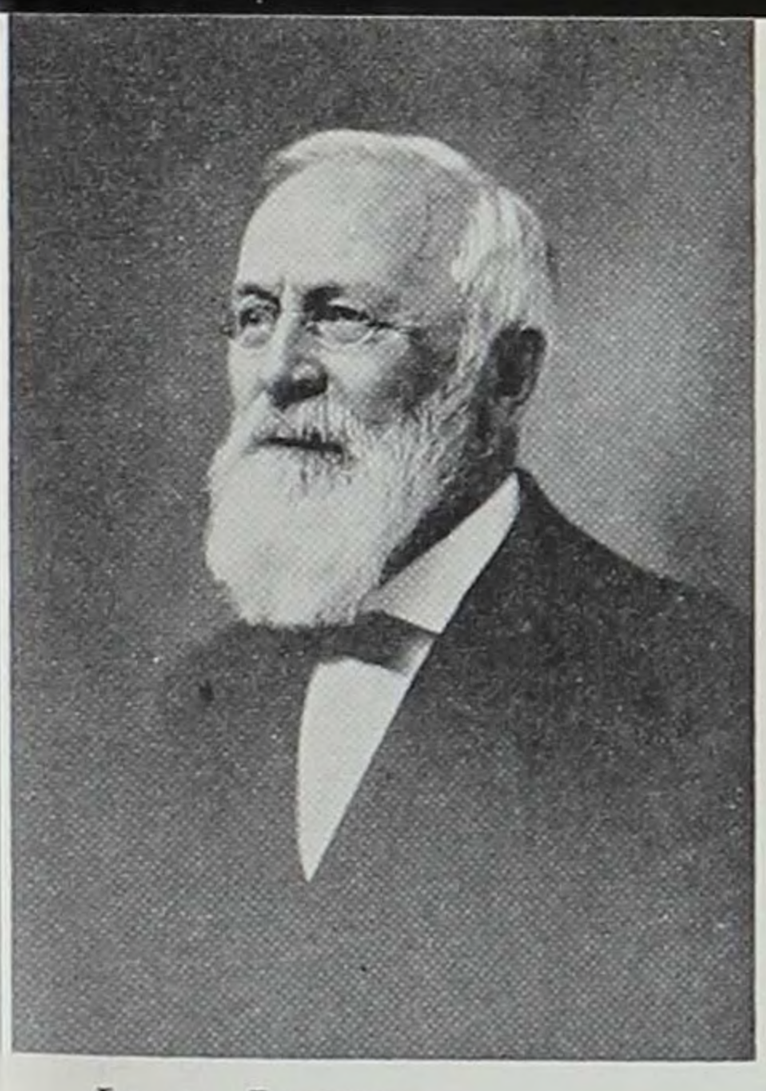
Baseball Team — 1895.

Standing, l. to r.: E. A. Bothne, Eli Lewison, A. J. Torrison, O. J. Akre, and W. L. Torrison. *Seated:* I. A. Thorson, O. S. Opheim, manager, and W. Sihler. *In front:* Otto Junl and Oscar L. Olson. *Not shown:* K. A. Thorsgaard and Hildus Ness.

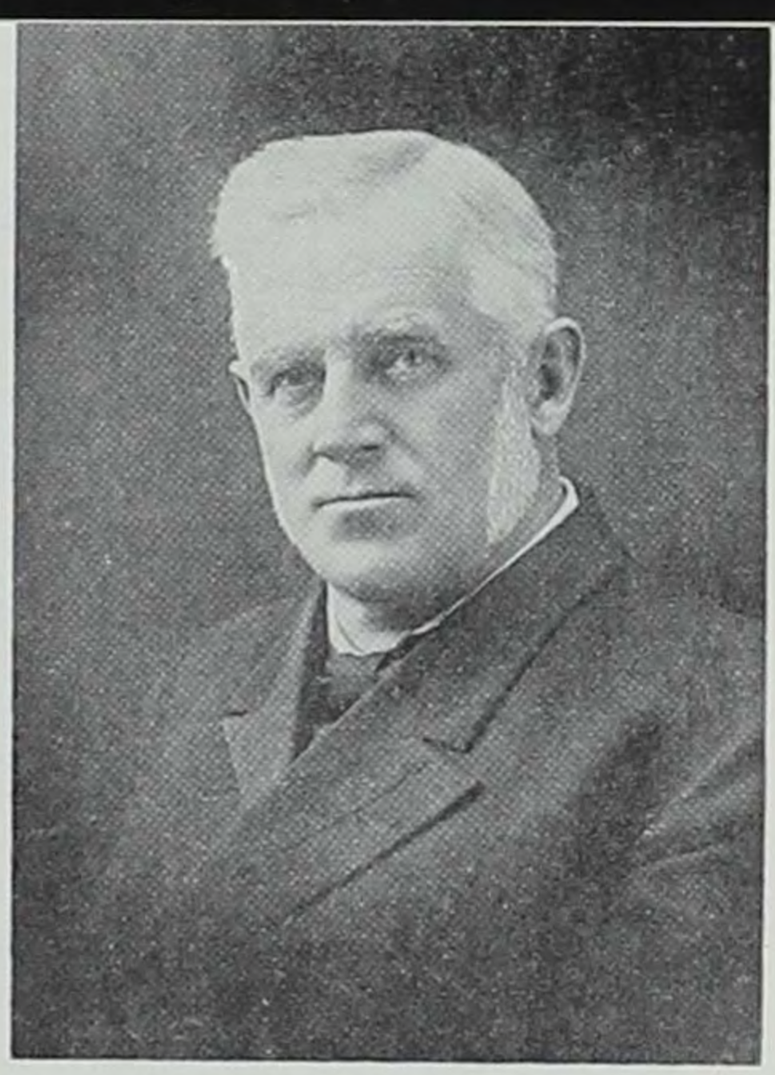
Seventeenth of May — Norway's natal day.
Held on lawn of outdoor log cabin museums on campus.



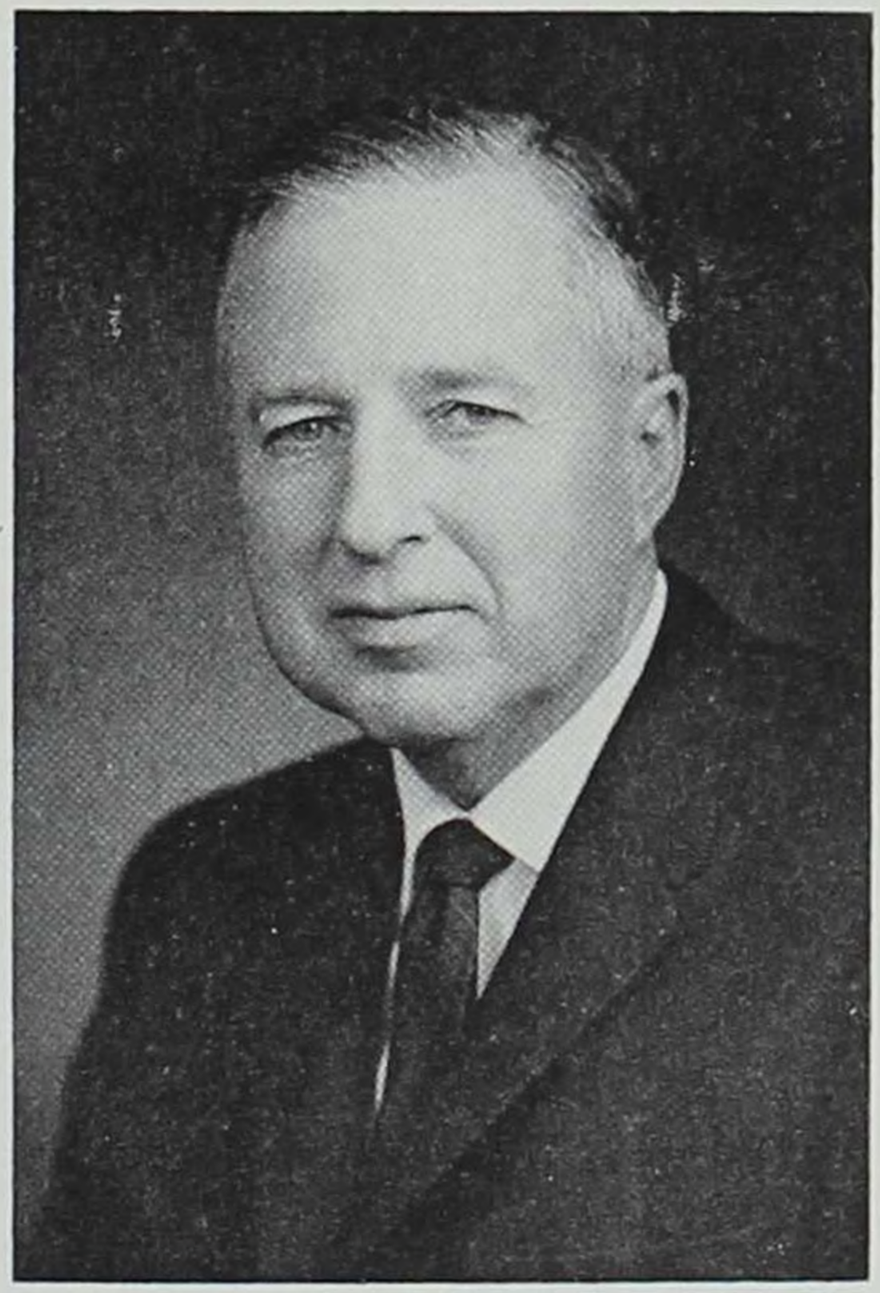
Fridtjof Nansen's visit on May 11, 1928.



LAUR. LARSEN
1861-1902



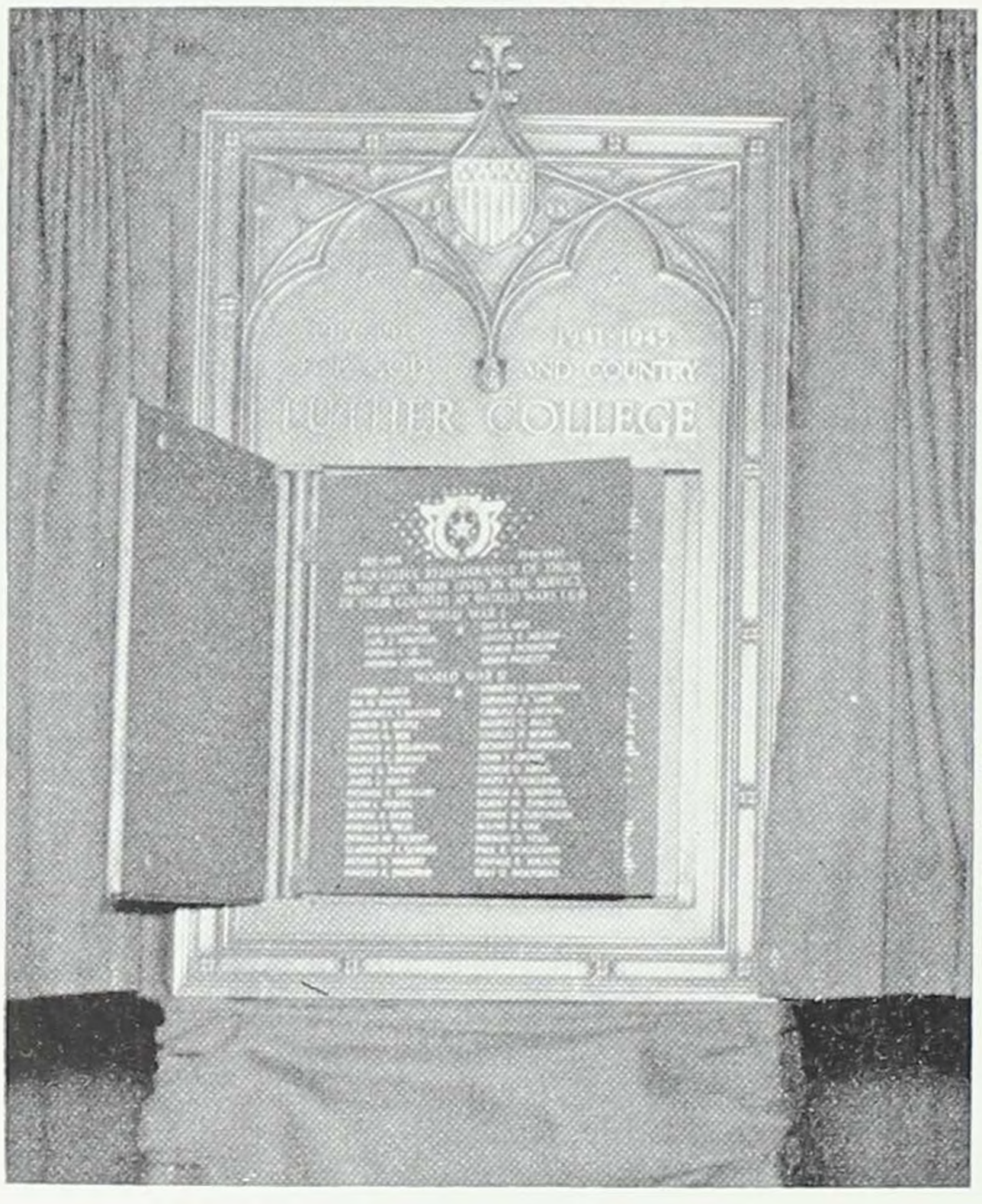
CHRISTIAN K. PREUS
1902-1921



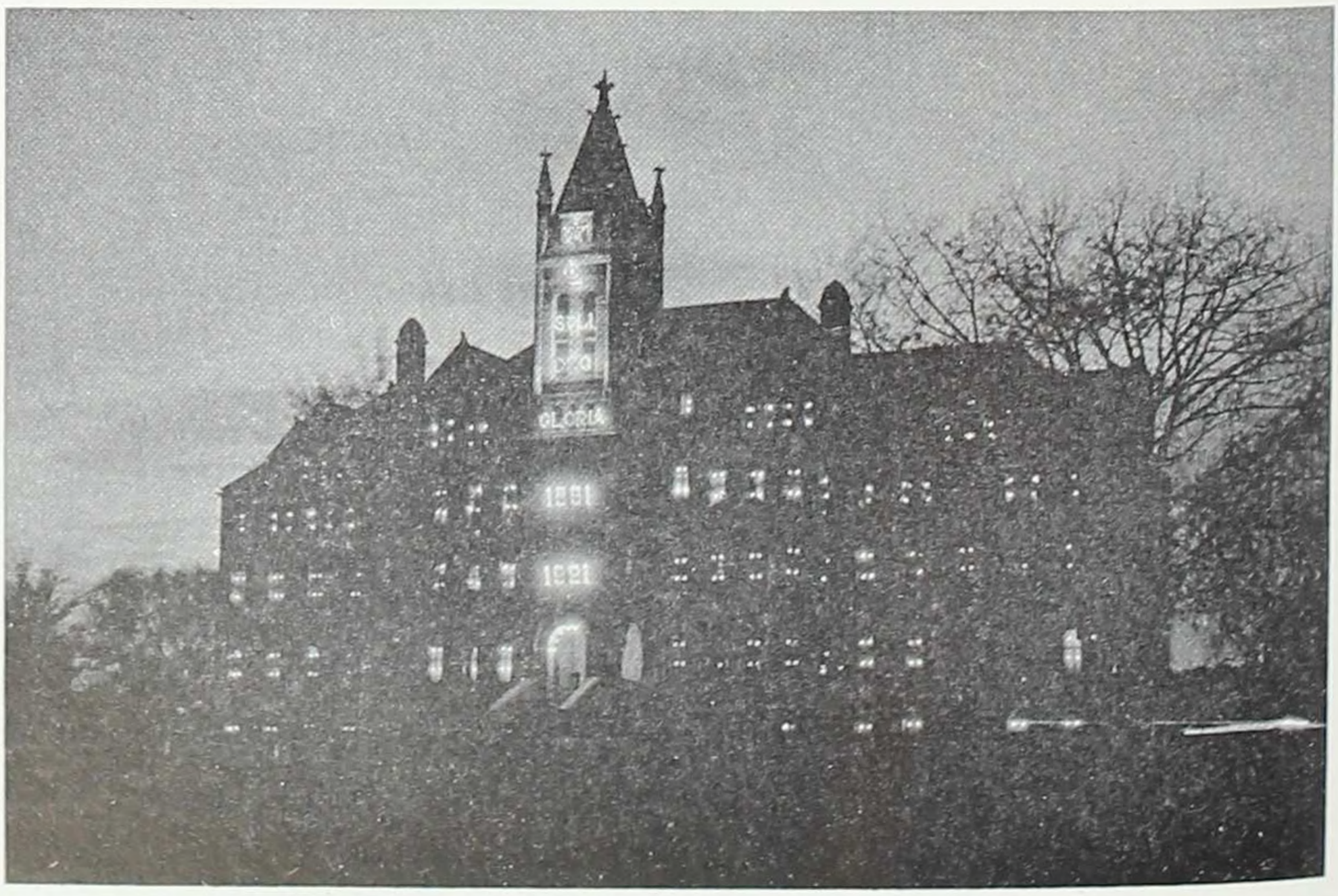
J. W. YLVISAKER
President, 1948—

OSCAR L. OLSON
1921-1932

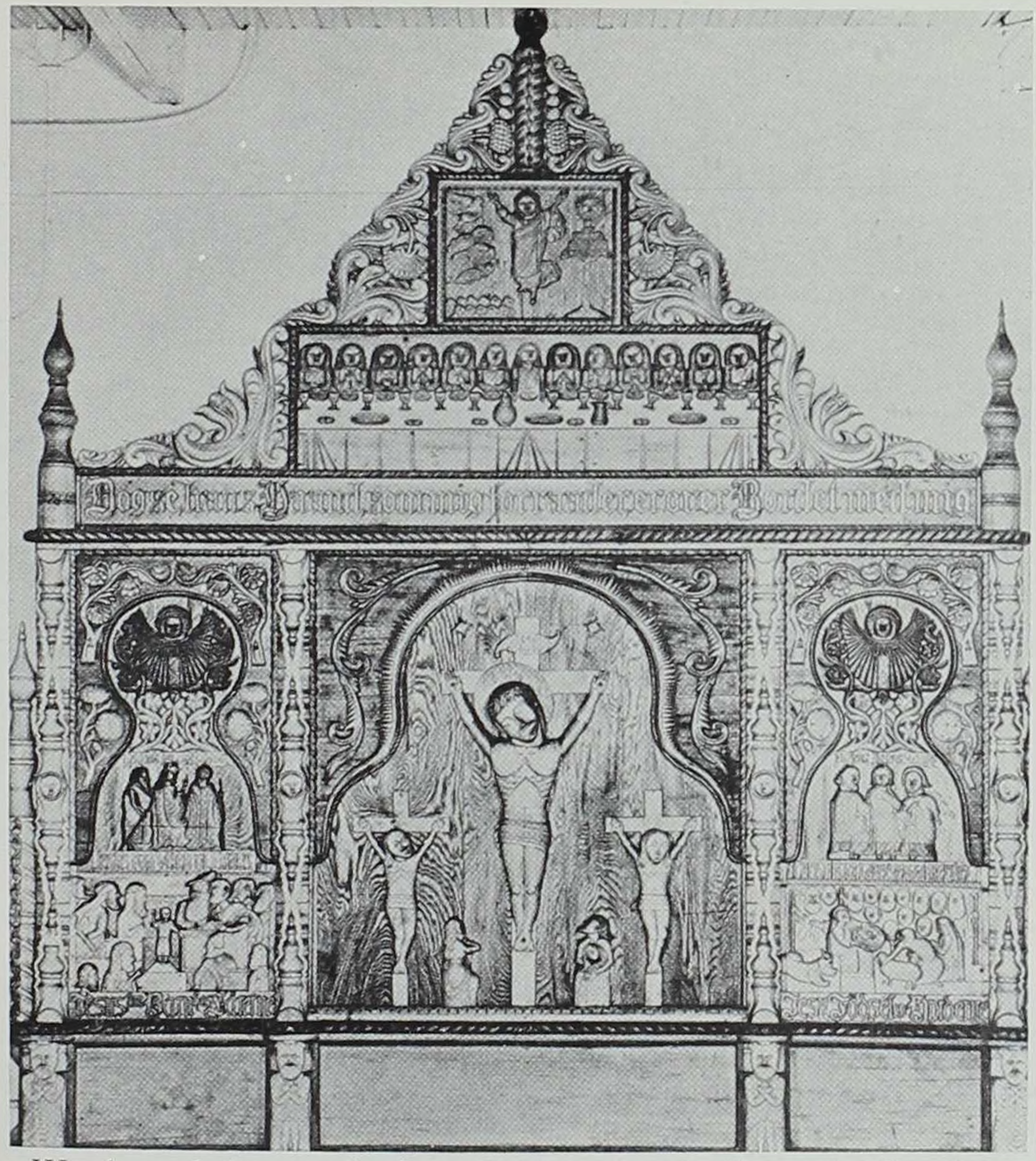
O. J. H. PREUS
1932-1948



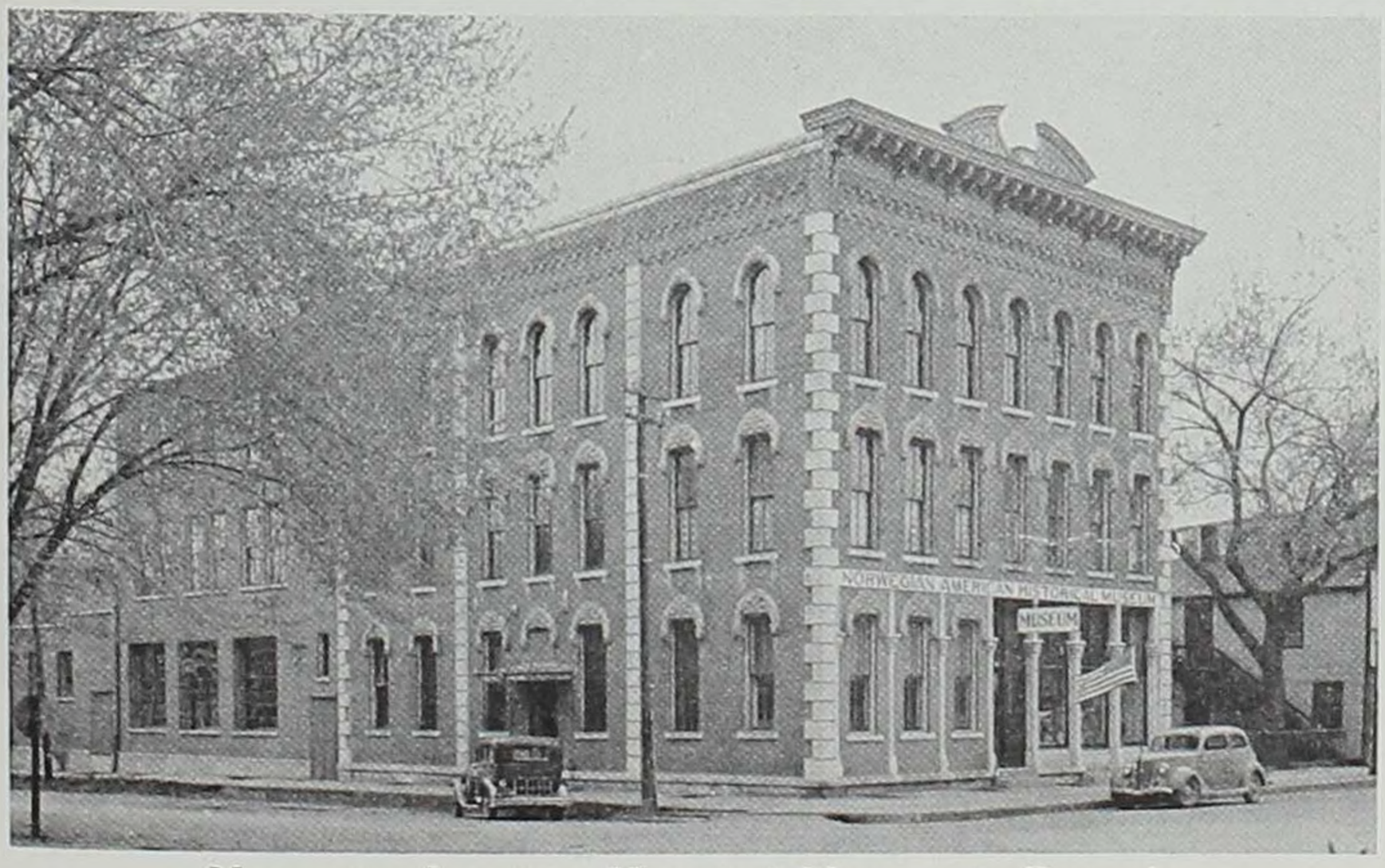
War Memorial
in
New Main



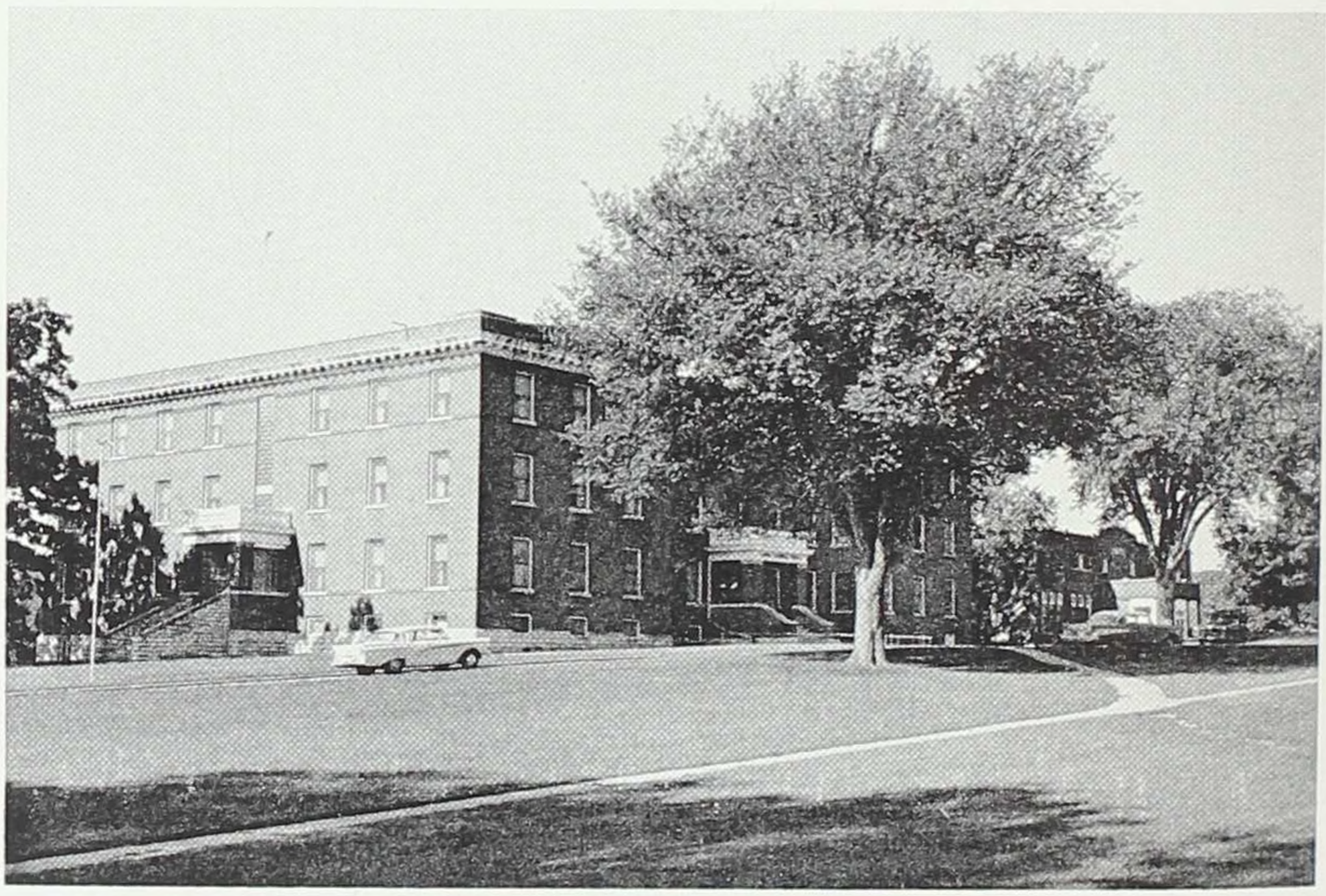
Illumination of Old Main — October 14, 1921.



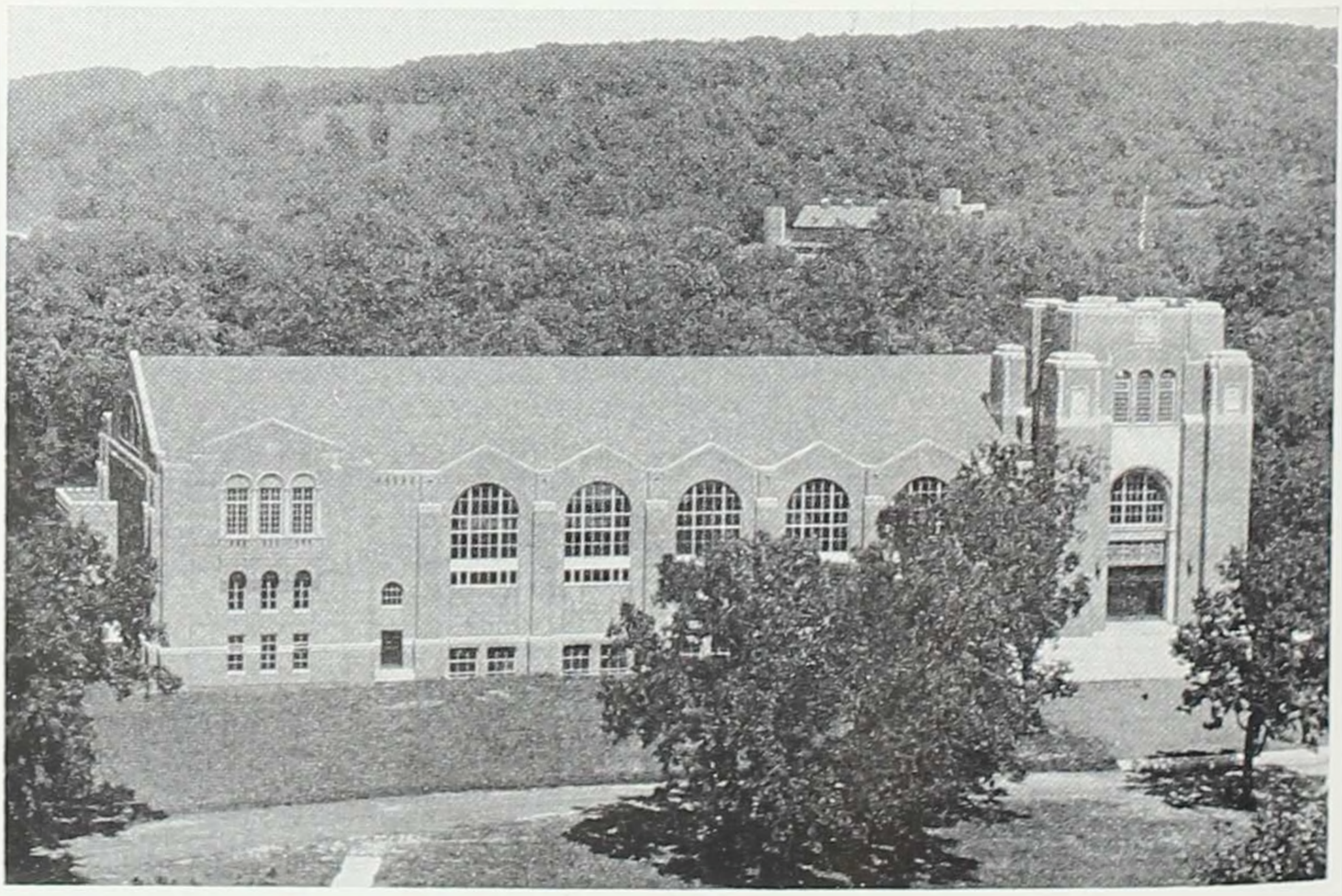
Woodcarved altarpiece by Lars Christenson in the Norwegian-American Historical Museum.



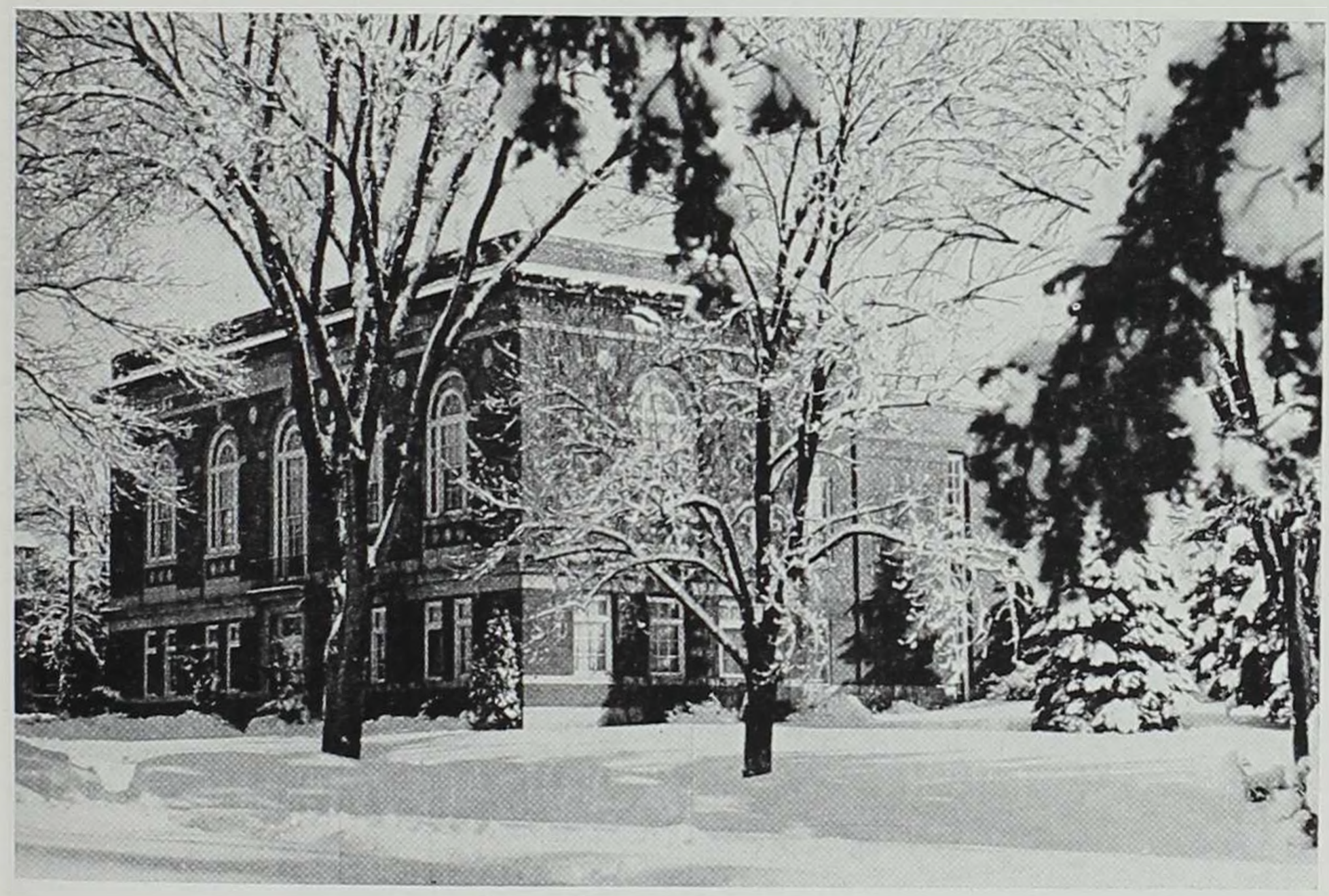
Norwegian-American Historical Museum in Decorah.



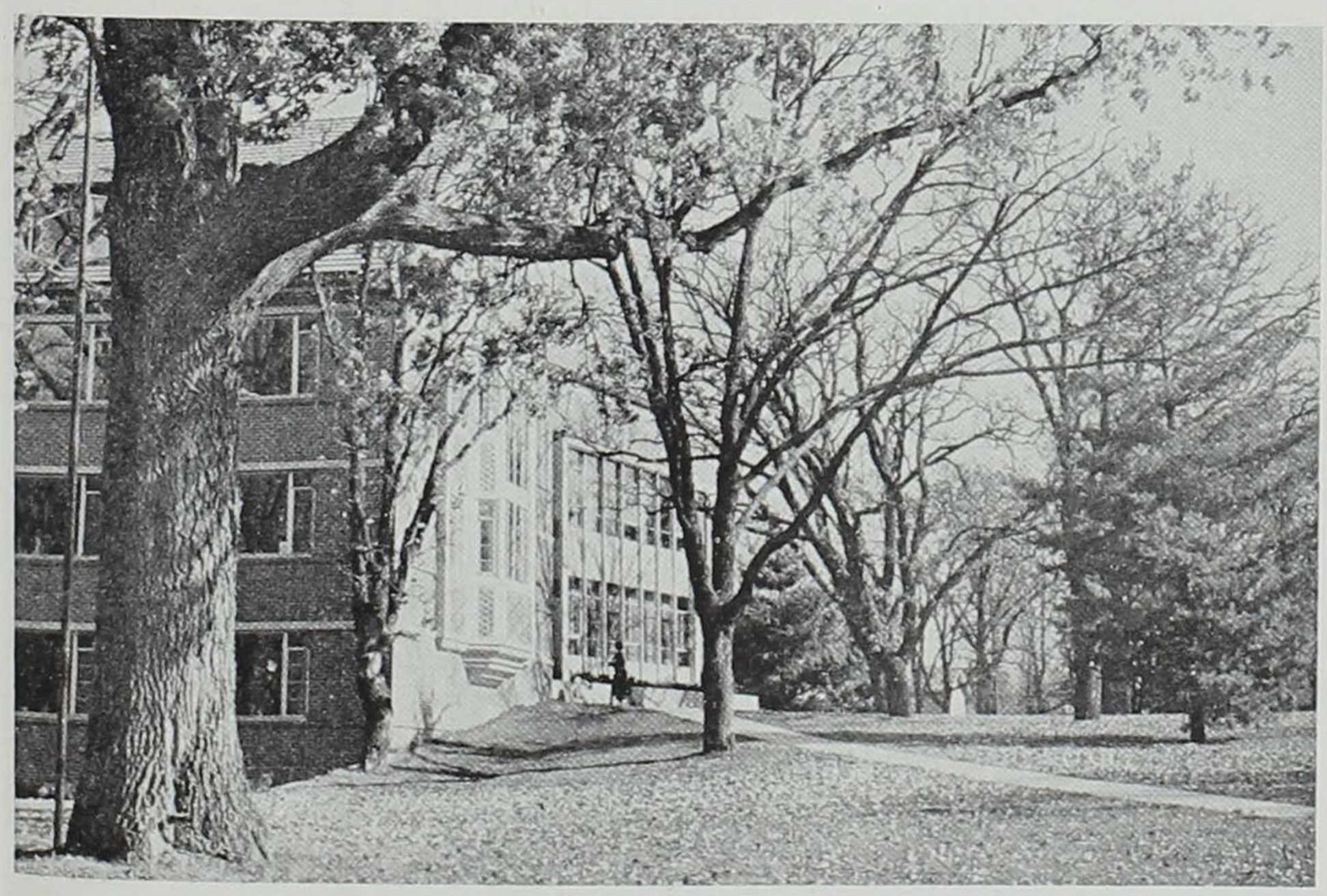
Laur. Larsen Hall.



C. K. Preus Gymnasium. College Farm in background.



Koren Library in winter.



Diderikke Brandt Hall. New dormitory for women.

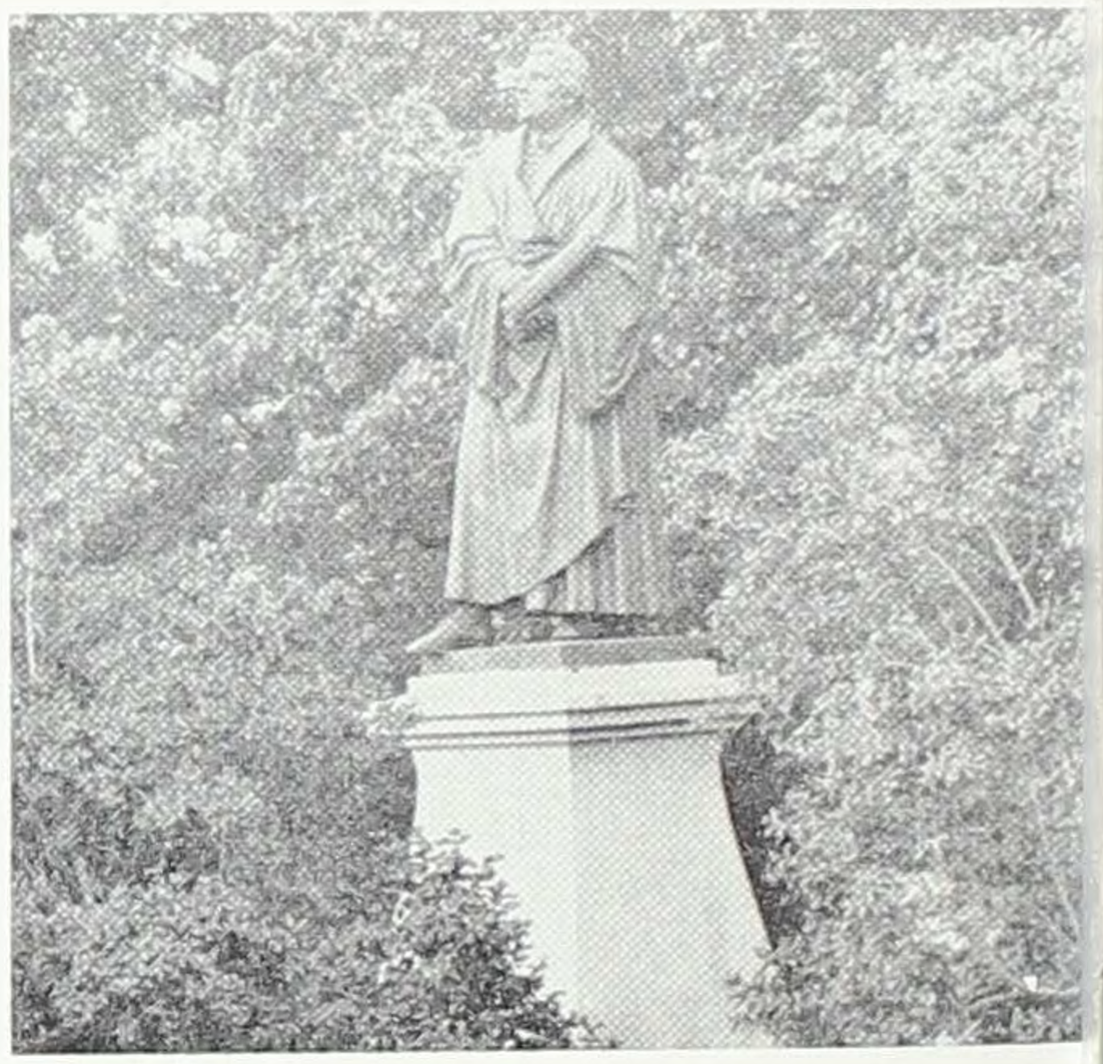
Crown Princess Martha receiving a gift in 1939 as Crown Prince Olav (now King Olav V) looks on.

Students leaving New Main.

A student social hour on Luther campus.

Strolling to Chapel.

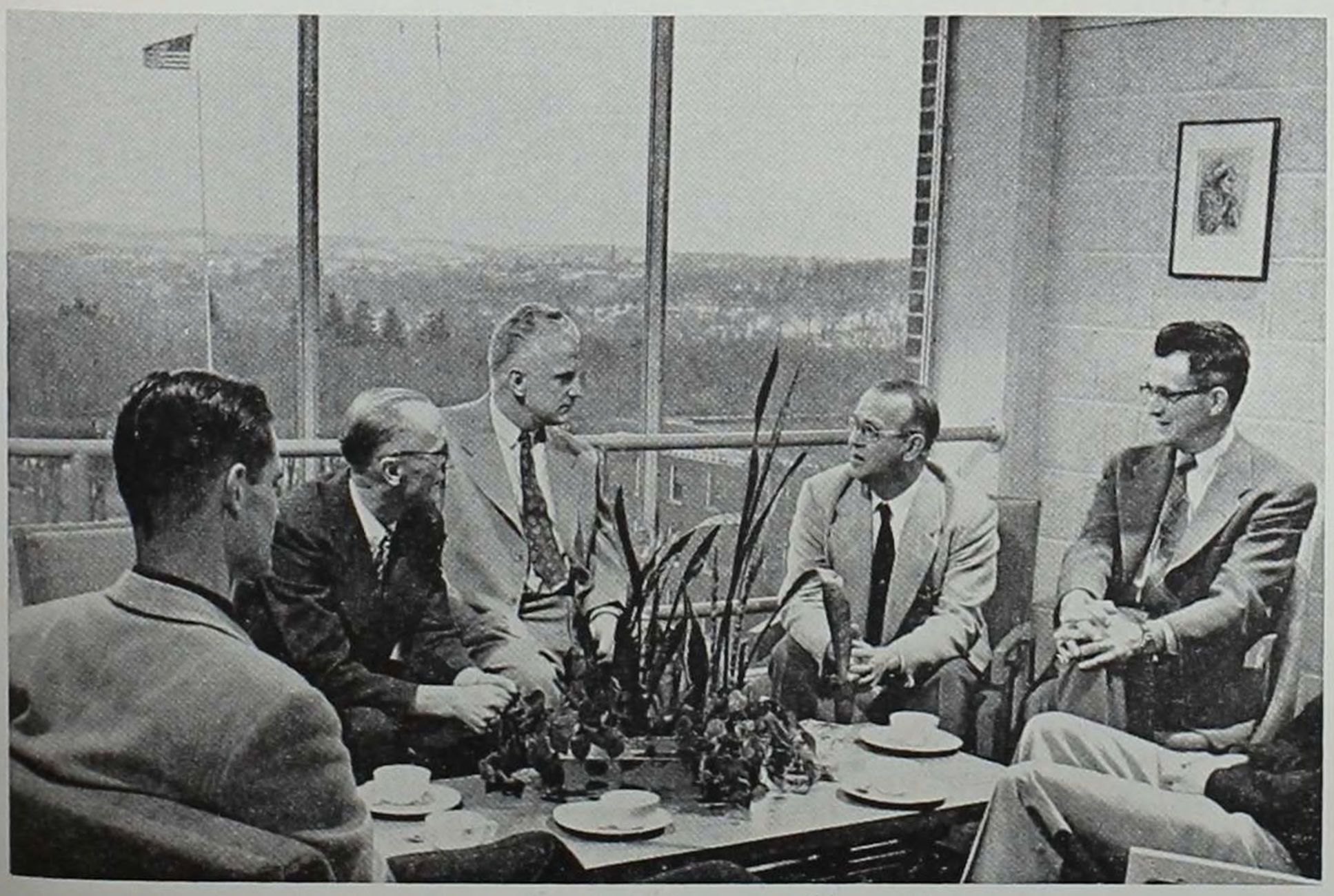
College motto at entrance to New Main.



Replica of Rietschel's statue of Martin Luther.

Christmas transparencies in Diderikke Brandt Hall window.

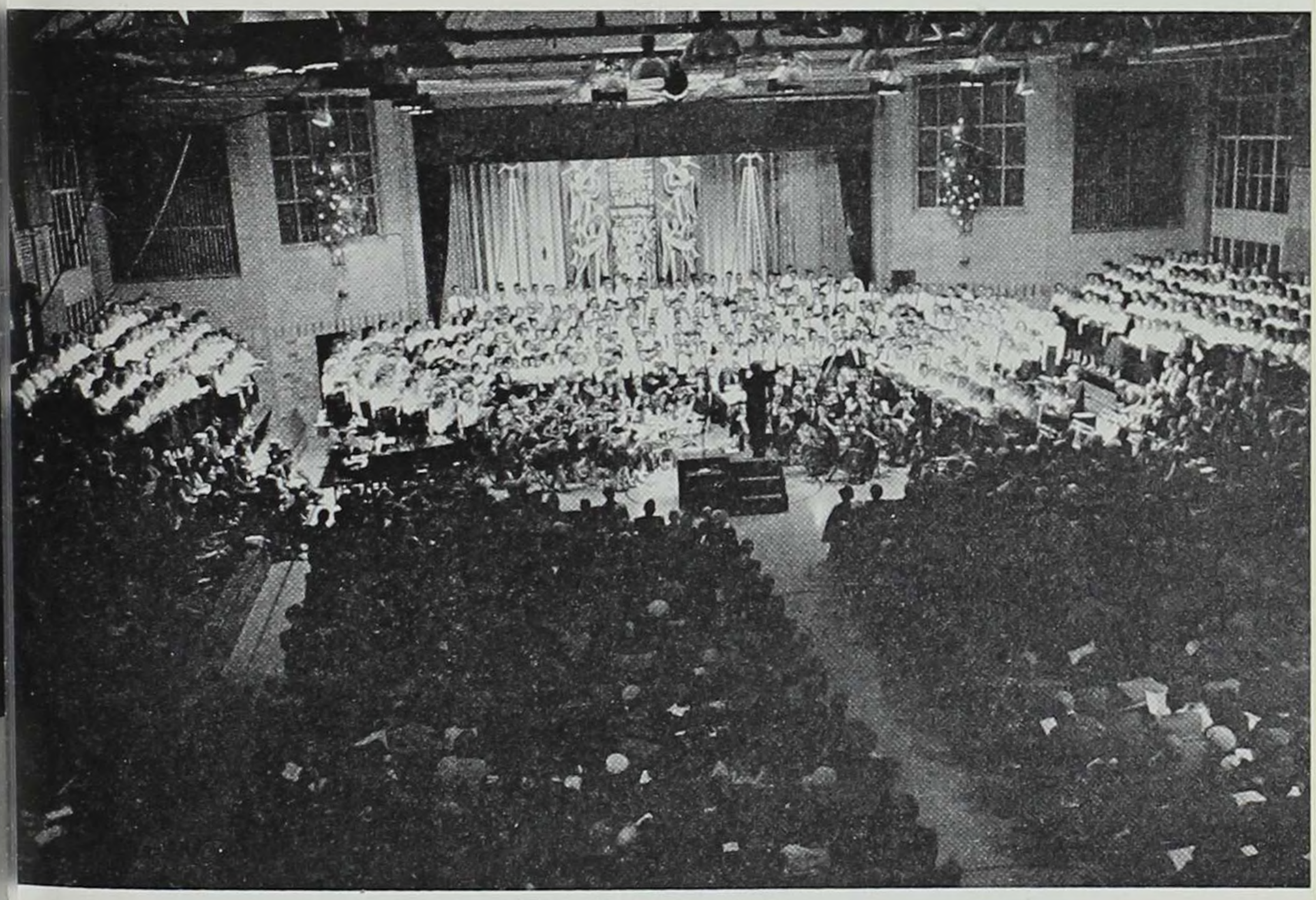
Norman Rice as King Oedipus and Patrick Mealy as Creon in *Oedipus Rex,* 1961.



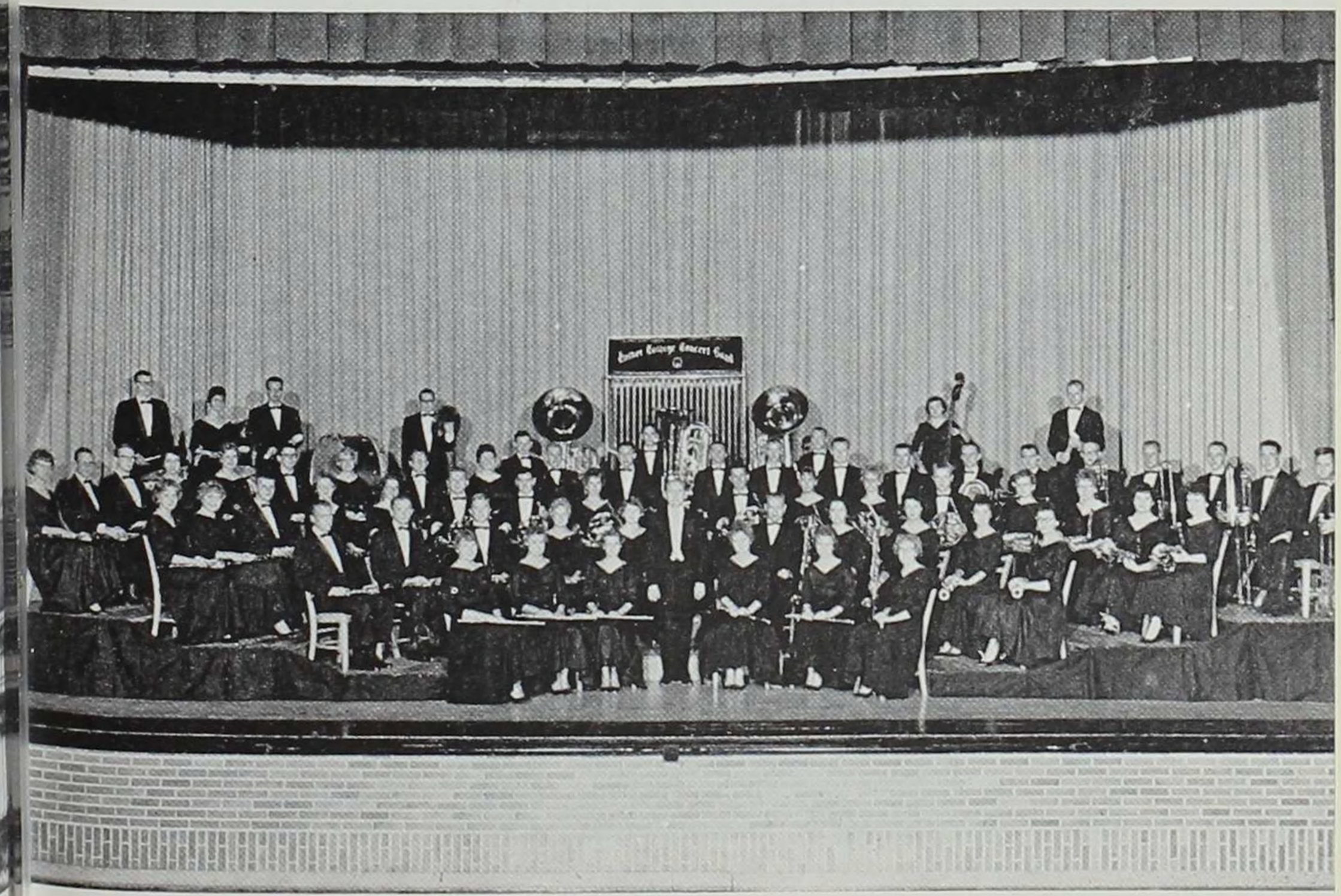
View from faculty lounge in New Main.

College Union. Under construction in 1961.

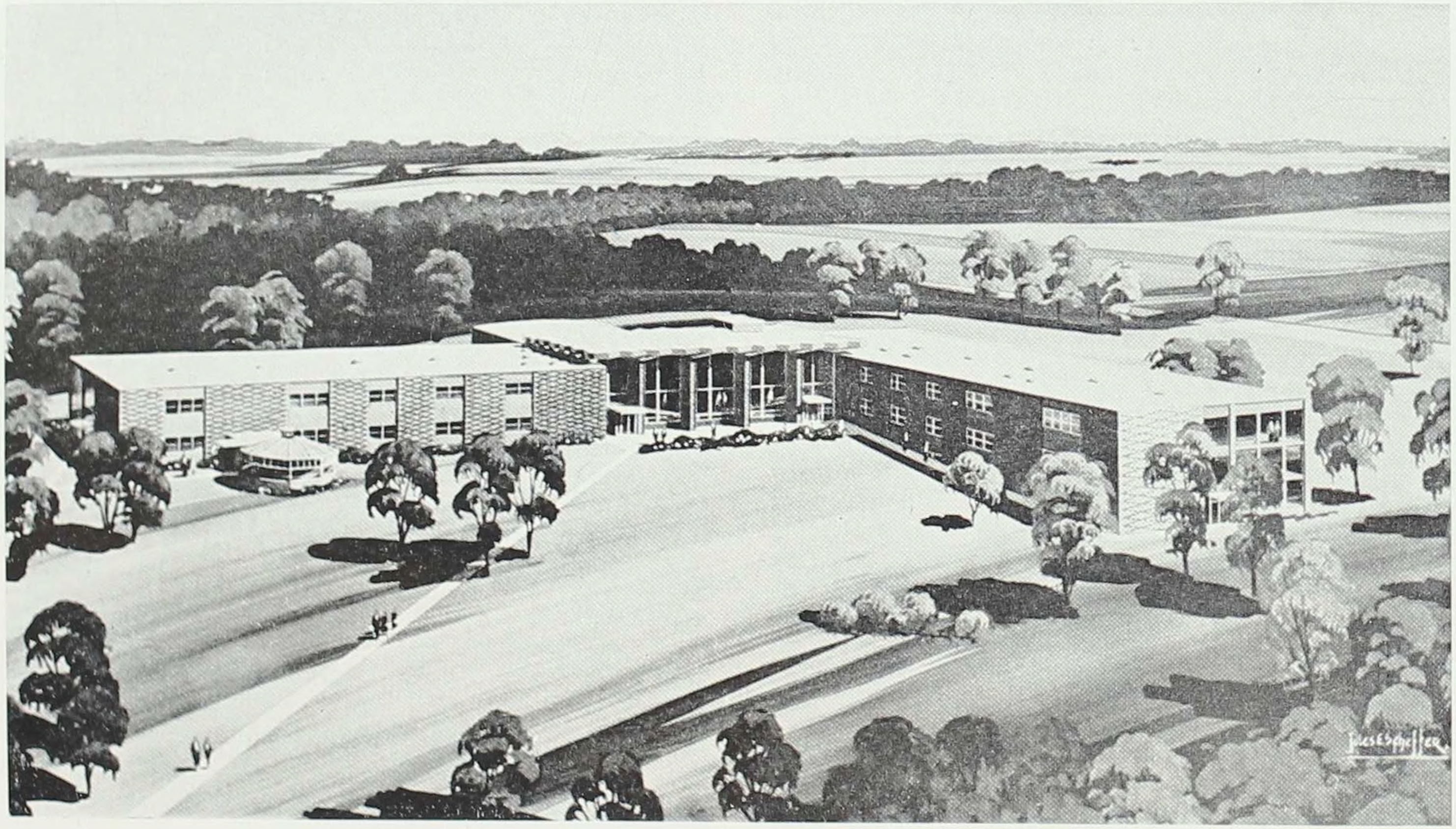
Oscar L. Olson Hall. New dormitory for men.



The Messiah — 1960.



Luther College Concert Band made European tour in 1961.



Valders Memorial Hall of Science dedicated September 29, 1961.

originally a part of the museum, were later turned over to the library.

In the nineties there was agitation for the introduction of coeducation. Some stirring editorials and articles appeared in *College Chips*. The Synod elected a committee to study and to report on the matter. But this was a step too advanced for the conservative old Synod leaders even though all daughter schools of Luther, such as St. Olaf College and many academies, were coeducational institutions. With political finesse that was worthy of a better cause, the leaders buried the report in committee, and Luther continued as a college for men.

Over the years the college had to a considerable degree become an American institution. Its old Latin school character was still reflected in its rigid classical curriculum, although even here the demand for electives had made itself felt. But the days when instructors were men trained in Norway were gone. The time when all instruction was given in Norwegian had passed. The second and third generations were coming on the scene, even in the faculty.

Among the students the change was even more marked. Through them and through the alumni new ideas were filtering in. Even the most conservative were aware of the changes, slow as some of them were to accommodate themselves to the inevitable. It cannot be said that the school itself

consciously sought to be an island of Norwegianism in a dynamic American world. On the contrary the leaders had from the earliest beginnings looked forward to the day when the institution would be wholly an American school. But the old ties, the old traditions were deep-rooted. Each break caused a tug at the heartstrings. All that was sound and strong and vital and beautiful in their heritage summoned up a loyal response from the school's leaders. Only slowly did they yield to the insistent demand of youth. The change came, but it came in subtle, little-noticed ways. By the time Laur. Larsen, its first president, stepped down in 1902 after forty-one years at his post, the college was ready for a long stride forward.