



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Flames silhouetted the gables of "Old Main" at Buena Vista College one September night in 1956, destroying a symbol of the past but energizing the college towards its future, under the leadership of President John A. "Jack" Fisher.

# WATERSHED YEARS

## John Fisher at Buena Vista College

*by William Cumberland*

**T**HE NIGHT of September 27, 1956, is firmly imprinted in the history of Buena Vista College and Storm Lake, Iowa. That was the night that a numb, horrified crowd of nearly five thousand watched in the early autumn darkness as fire consumed "Old Main," the chief administration and class-

room building of Buena Vista College. The spiraling flames penetrated the darkness and warmed the air of the September night. Those flames could be seen for miles across the flat landscape. Observers could hear in the hot crackling of the wooden floors and aging staircases the death knell of the college. However,

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President John A. Fisher and Dean William D. Wesselink, supported by faculty, staff, student body, and community, would use the catastrophe as a step into the future. Old Main would become a symbol that would link the old and new Buena Vista.

Founded in 1891 as a four-year liberal arts college by the presbyteries of Sioux City and Fort Dodge (affiliated with the Presbyterian Church), Buena Vista College attracted only minimal regional and national attention over the years until it became the recipient of an eighteen-million-dollar gift from oil philanthropist Harold Walter Siebens in 1980. While this gift, and its subsequent use under the administrative leadership of current president Keith Briscoe, has assured a distinguished future for the college, it by no means clouded a respectable although struggling past. The watershed in the college's history was not the Siebens gift (important as it will always be) but the "Great Fire" of 1956. At that time Fisher and Wesselink determined to push forward when they might have quit.

A brief look at Buena Vista's first sixty-five years reveals continued optimism in the face of constant struggle. The institution's founders, who transferred what was essentially a preparatory and junior college from Fort Dodge to Storm Lake in 1891, had visions of creating the "Yale of the Midwest." Reality, however, consisted of a steady parade of presidents (many of them clergy), the inability to raise operating funds let alone an endowment, underpaid professors, and inadequate dormitory, library, and scientific facilities. For three decades Buena Vista centered around a solitary building — Old Main, completed at the end of the college's first troubled year in 1892.

Misfortune came early and persisted. The halls of the main building still smelled like fresh lumber when the college's first president, the Rev. Mr. Loyal Y. Hays died suddenly on May 16, 1892. In 1893 college officials were unable to locate the diploma to present to their first graduate, Jennie Gordon Hutchison. The acting president, the Rev. Mr. John MacAllister, offered his wedding certificate as a substitute — which the desperate graduate gratefully accepted. Shortly thereafter, it appeared that the new building would see few college

graduates because pressure from the Presbyterian Board of Visitors (who had the task of accrediting the denomination's colleges) forced Buena Vista to operate primarily as a commercial, preparatory, and two-year college until 1901. However, the aggressive and successful leadership of the institution's fifth president, the Rev. Mr. E. E. Reed solicited an endowment for \$50,000, built library resources, increased enrollment, and by 1904 had moved Buena Vista back into the ranks of four-year colleges. Growth in numbers, endowment, and prestige was slow, however, under the succession of presidents who followed Reed. Still the college was able to produce outstanding teachers, scholars, clergy, business leaders, and other professionals reflecting the college's motto, "Education for Service."

THE 1920S brought a short-lived prosperity. The campus was finally enlarged with the addition of a gymnasium (Victory Hall) and Science Hall. Together with "Old Main" their silhouettes huddled against the always-resplendent lake. However, "Old Main" ("it was always old," remarked an early student) was constantly in need of repair; Victory Hall was soon discovered to be too small; and Science Hall lacked equipment, and from 1928 until after World War II, also housed the library. In *World by the Tail*, award-winning novelist Marjorie Holmes described the humble campus where she spent two of her undergraduate years in the late 1920s as "the shaggy campus of Vista College. Its three humble buildings were like tired old men asleep in the moon."

Hard times returned again during the early years of the Great Depression and at one point Buena Vista College nearly merged with Coe College in Cedar Rapids. Instead, Henry Olson, former school superintendent at Greenfield, Iowa, took over the reins and managed Buena Vista College on a shoestring budget for the next twenty-three years. The feisty Olson stuffed sandwiches in his pockets and rode cattle trains to professional meetings. He devised a system of barter in which students contributed farm produce in exchange for tuition and the faculty accepted the eggs, meat, and



The GI Bill brought more students to Buena Vista College. By 1953 enrollment had doubled since pre-war years. Here, former pilot James H. Thompson takes a study break to admire baby Coleen with his wife.

potatoes as barter in lieu of salary. No student was denied admittance because of lack of funds, and no faculty or staff member went hungry.

The end of World War II and the GI Bill brought many changes to American higher education, including Buena Vista College. By 1953 more than a thousand graduates had walked along the corridors and stairs of Old Main since the college's opening. With federal funds and private gifts, two dormitories were added during the 1950s. Still lacking modern library facilities, the college obtained World War II army barracks to contain the growing, though barely adequate collection. In 1953 there was an endowment of less than \$200,000 and a faculty of thirty, yet the student body, now about four hundred, had doubled since pre-war years. While many of the faculty were quality teachers, only a few of them held doctorates, and fewer yet had published scholarly books and articles.

President Olson was and would remain a hero to many. Even his opponents agreed that

he had saved the institution from extinction, achieved North Central accreditation in 1952, and maintained institutional morale and faith through the depression and war years. He also had necessarily sacrificed quality in key academic areas in order to balance the budget, pay the debt, and hold tuition costs down in order to attract students. Board members, acting in conjunction with the church hierarchy, felt the college needed younger, more flexible leadership, in tune with changing trends in higher education. Pressured to resign in November 1953, Olson left the institution he had loved and nourished a disappointed and bitter man.

**T**HE BOARD'S SEARCH for a new president led to the appointment of Professor of Education John A. (Jack) Fisher in May 1954. Fisher was forty-four and had been registrar, administrative dean, and chairperson of the division of philosophy, psychology, education, and religion at Coe College in Cedar Rapids. He was an active churchman



President John A. "Jack" Fisher welcomes students on the opening pages of the 1957 *Beaver Log* yearbook.



SHS/DES MOINES (ORIGINALLY FROM DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE)

1948 freshmen Louise Kretzinger and DeeAnn Carlson stride away from Old Main, which over the years housed the chapel, science labs, music studios, classrooms, library, offices, student center — and occasionally faculty.

and while at Buena Vista, would become the first person to serve as moderator of the Synod of Iowa, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The new president was a solidly built, dark-complexioned, friendly man who enjoyed meeting people. He smoked huge cigars that seemed to emit an odorous, almost asphyxiating black smoke. He slept late and worked late, which soon aroused minor criticisms from some trustees and local residents accustomed to different work habits.

Fisher and his wife, Ruth Ann, had first visited the Buena Vista campus in March 1954. As

Ruth Ann looked at historic but decaying Old Main, she had said to Jack, "What a poor little place, but it's a gorgeous town." They agreed that "nobody in their right mind would come up here." Still, they were impressed by the scenic splendor and warm vitality of the community, and they felt they had a call to accept the presidency of the beleaguered institution.

The Fishers would reside in the stately but aging presidential home known as the Stuart-Miller House, which was directly across the street from Old Main. They would use their own funds for painting, wallpaper, and new

linoleum. Ruth Ann was a Coe College graduate and former executive secretary of the Cedar Rapids and Marion Council of Churches. A gracious hostess and veteran of numerous "sit-down dinners" in an era of few funds and little assistance, Ruth Ann helped her husband build solid relationships with community and church. She was also a strong supporter of the Faculty Dames women's club, in an era when that organization provided an important social outlet for many faculty and staff women and spouses. There persisted during the Fisher years a close community, inspired (as Ruth Ann recalled years later) by the fact that no one had much and "everybody was willing to share what they had with somebody else."

Tasks facing the new president included building the endowment, expanding dormitory space, renovating an ever-deteriorating Old Main, and creating new confidence in the college's future. Fisher immediately sought to build rapport with his faculty, hire new staff with doctorates, upgrade faculty salaries, and recruit a capable but more diversified student body. He also planned to expand the program of Christian activities and increase financial aid to worthy students. He devised a building pro-

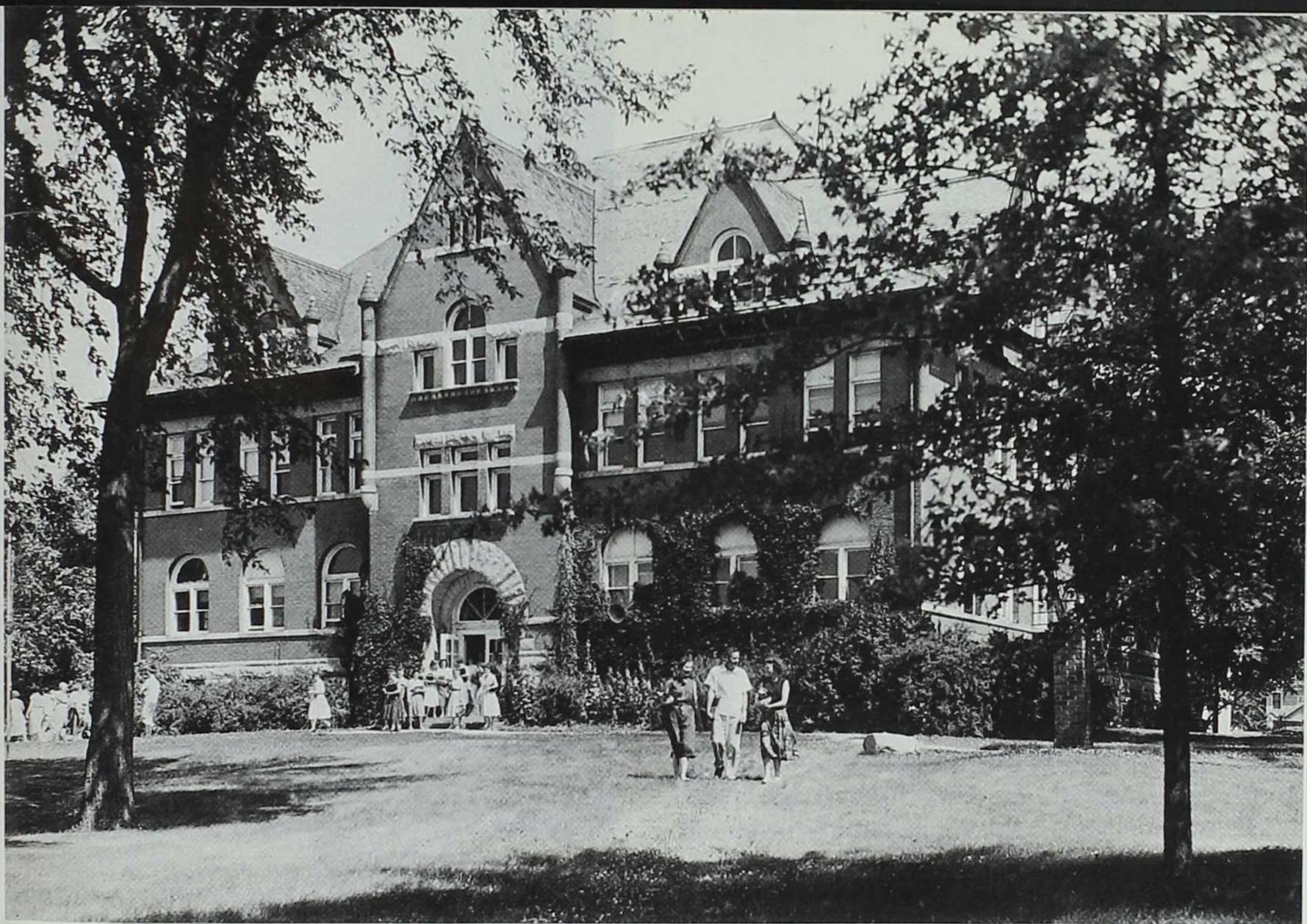
gram and in 1954, working with long-time trustee Z. Z. White, secured a loan from the Federal Housing and Finance Agency for construction of a men's dormitory. More dormitories were vital. For more than sixty years, the majority of Buena Vista students had been forced to find lodging off-campus or commute to classes. As a result of the on-campus residency, the college community would be brought closer together.

A Ford Foundation grant of \$114,000 also helped Fisher establish the first phase of his long-range plan. The grant would begin to boost the traditionally low faculty salaries. Nevertheless, as Fisher pointed out, an endowment of \$100,000 at 5 percent would produce only \$5,000 a year. It would, he noted, take from one and a half to two million dollars in endowment funds for the college to carry out its program.

**O**NLY ONE YEAR into the Fisher administration, Buena Vista appeared to be making substantial progress. The new president felt his goals were slowly being realized. Fisher was optimistic



The chapel in Old Main. Until 1920, faculty were required to sit in the front rows of chairs.



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An idyllic view of Old Main. Until 1920 it had been the only permanent building on Buena Vista campus.

that Buena Vista College could move beyond its image as a normal school and fully realize its liberal arts heritage.

Some very able members of the Buena Vista faculty at this time included George Reynolds, professor of history and political science, who established a solid pre-law program; Albert Hirsch, professor of language, a refugee from Hitler's holocaust and a profound and humane scholar; James Christiansen, professor of chemistry, who had formerly been in charge of a research section with General Mills in Chicago; Lester Williams, professor of religion and philosophy and dean of students, who had participated in archeological digs in the Near East; Gladys Kuehl, who brought national recognition to the college in the field of forensics; Will B. ("Bill") Green, who headed the music department; Jay Beekman, the legendary baseball coach; and Luman W. Sampson, dean from 1941 to 1947 and now professor of sociology and chairperson of the Division of Social Sciences. There was also William Wesselink, academic dean since 1947 (who later became vice-president for student affairs).

Fisher added to this core of veterans new ap-

pointments such as Ron Smith, a fiery but scholarly biologist; Robert Tollefson, a dynamic and globally oriented professor of religion and philosophy; Lanny Grigsby, a former star athlete who would secure two graduate degrees in mathematics; and William H. Cumberland, who would chronicle and interpret the institution's past.

Only two years into Fisher's administration, the college felt it was on the verge of achieving new academic respectability. The college newspaper, *The Tack*, announced in early September 1956 that many changes had taken place on campus during the summer — completion of the men's dorm, moving the student union into the basement of the new dorm, and repairing and painting Old Main.

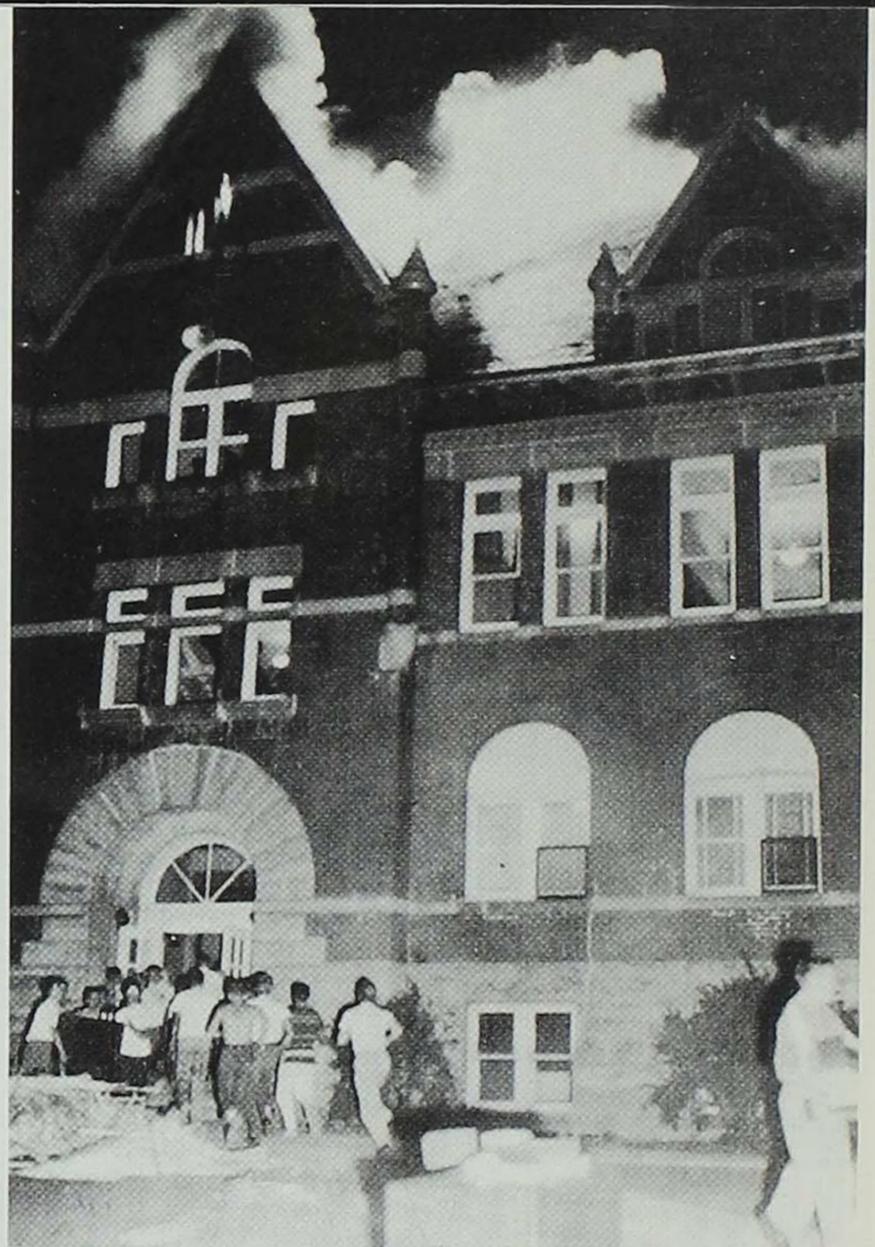
**D**ESPITE the college's vision of the future, its past held meaning, too, and one building symbolized that past. Old Main had long been the gathering point, the educational, spiritual, and moral ark of the institution. Until 1920 it had been the

only permanent building on campus. At various times it housed the science labs, library, chapel, music studios, and student center. Occasionally, its upper floor provided lodging for hard-pressed faculty. Stately elms, evergreens, and maples, planted by every class since 1906, lined the nearby campus walks and framed the red brick building and its beckoning, majestic arch of white stone. Through the years ivy had advanced up the south side of the building.

Then at 10:15 PM on September 27, 1956, fire threatened to destroy Fisher's efforts for the future and the college's heritage from the past. Smoke was discovered billowing out of the beloved but decaying Old Main. The flames spread rapidly in the building with its highly combustible, oil-mopped floors. By the time the fire departments of Storm Lake, Alta, and Newell arrived, the blaze could be seen in Spencer forty miles away. The exact cause of the fire would remain unknown, although there was speculation a smoldering cigarette could have been left on the roof by a worker. Apparently there was no electrical short or outage because the lights remained on during the early stages of the fire.

President Fisher, Dean Wesselink, and Public Relations Director Don Kelly were attending a meeting of Iowa private colleges at Lake Okoboji when Ruth Ann Fisher called to notify her husband that Old Main was burning. Jack Fisher turned to the group and asked, "What would you say if your 'Old Main' was burning?" Several responded, "Let us know how you did it," for they too were troubled with aging buildings. But it was serious business, and as Fisher and his staff sped home, the future of the institution was in doubt. To many Storm Lakers, Old Main was Buena Vista College, and they felt a sense of horror as they heard the sirens and watched the red glow in the sky — knowing that the fire had to be on the campus.

Speech professor Gladys Kuehl was enjoying a function of the Phi Alpha Pi sorority at the Cobblestone Inn (a dancing and dining landmark on the lake shore) when a phone call about the fire quickly broke up the party. Kuehl (whose office was in the basement of Old Main) and the others rushed back to the cam-



As flames lit the sky, Buena Vista students rescued books, records, and equipment from Old Main.

pus. "Pianos, musical instruments, chapel seats, and stage properties came hurtling down from above," she recalled. Kuehl's old davenport and chair set, bought when she was first married and later donated for plays, fell from the east wing of the third floor, the speech and drama department. Professor Les Williams and his colleagues felt sickened as they watched their offices burn, along with their lifetime collections of books. Grace Russell (whose father had built Old Main) and Phoebe Lafoy (former dean of women) watched in anguish and horror. Eight times they heard the mournful twang as pianos, including the baby grand from the second-floor chapel, fell through the flames.

Members of the faculty, administration, student body, and community sought desperately to salvage what they could. Even as the building became untenable, the students "without regard to themselves saved all of the school records and virtually all of the stock of books in the bookstore," according to the *Storm Lake Register*. "Filing cabinets, safes, heavy cabinets of addressograph plates — all were carried to safety." Furniture, instruments, and ma-

chines too heavy to carry through the flames were thrown out of the windows. Brigades were formed to cart away records and books from the burning building. Still, tradition was maintained. One freshman, mindful of his beanie, put down his books and "buttoned" when a senior passed by. Plummeting pianos and desks added to the danger but did not halt the salvaging. Indeed, it was not until the roof of Old Main began to collapse that the students, ordered by the police, gave up the struggle.

Because the fire had started on the top of the building and worked its way down, it had moved more slowly than if it had started in the basement or main floor. This had given the salvagers extra time. Ruth Ann Fisher believed that had the male students not been concentrated in the new dormitory, where they could quickly organize their salvaging efforts, many invaluable student and administrative records would have been lost. A legend persists that the following day the students were unable to lift the heavy files they had so easily carted out

of the burning building the previous evening.

The blaze raged for more than three hours before it was brought under control. Finally, as the great fire ebbed and reality replaced an earlier numbness and shock, Fisher and his staff "joined in a circle on the canvas-covered and equipment-cluttered gym floor to bow their heads in prayer." They were, as the *Storm Lake Register* continued, "a student body and faculty united by one thought . . . loyalty to Buena Vista College."

**T**HIS WAS John Fisher's finest hour. He could have surrendered to the despair he surely felt and temporarily suspended classes and operations. Rather, he announced that classes would continue as usual. And, at 1:15 A.M., he began his plans for Buena Vista's future.

As Fisher looked at the charred skeleton of Old Main, he could see the Christian flag still hanging in the Little Theatre. Fisher would never forget that moment. He would speak of it



The wreckage of Old Main could have spelled discouragement and despair to Fisher. Instead, the president ordered classes to continue and rebuilding to begin, noting "A college . . . is much more than a building."

often as a new Buena Vista began to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the old. Nor would he forget custodian Buck Allison, who, at considerable personal risk, crawled through the ruins to retrieve both the Christian flag and a badly charred American flag. A moment later, what was left of the top floor of Old Main crumbled. The flag would become a memento of the past and a symbol for the future. Today, more than three decades later, the Christian flag is displayed at baccalaureate and other major functions, and the American flag remains encased in glass in the Centennial Room of Siebens Forum.

Professor Luman W. Sampson was grateful that his honor scroll had made it through the fire undamaged. The honor society, initiated by Sampson in 1936, had become another revered tradition of the college. And yet, as Sampson knew, the loss from the fire was too great to be replaced. "Not only was there the material loss of the building," he said, "with its classrooms, offices, studios, pianos and a considerable amount of equipment, but also the loss of this landmark of memories for all those who had entered the building in the years it had stood as the symbol of Buena Vista College."

Fortunately there had been no loss of life or serious injury, nor had the fire spread to the homes across the street. In the days that followed, the bonds that united Buena Vista would be strengthened. Old Main had many mourners, and faculty and students poured out many eloquent words on its behalf. Certainly, President Fisher realized that the fire now mandated a new building program, thereby threatening the growing intellectual climate he had hoped to foster. Sensibly he reminded the college and community: "We regret the passing of a building that for many years has housed a considerable portion of the activities of the College. A college, however, is much more than a building and so the students, faculty and staff have not seen fit to interrupt the normal routines necessary to fulfill the purposes of the College. We believe in the future of Buena Vista."

Fisher did not permit the tragedy to disrupt classes or the ordinary functioning of the college for a single minute. Storm Lake churches



A bittersweet message on a 1956 homecoming float. "Resurgo" represented the resurgent spirit on campus following the fire at Old Main.

offered their buildings as temporary classrooms. Jack Fisher's home became his office and planning center for a new Buena Vista. Some professors found office space in the men's dormitory. A small cottage near the football field housed forensics and advanced speech classes. Events were held as scheduled.

Among those events was homecoming, at which Buena Vista bowed 13-7 to the powerful Simpson College team. One of the most poignant floats in the morning parade down Storm Lake's main thoroughfare was the one designed by the sophomore class. Three young men riding on the float lifted the Christian flag in a pose reminiscent of the three marines who had hoisted the American flag on Iwo Jima. The message was "resurgo," the resurging spirit of Buena Vista College.

Willis Edson, a former trustee for fifty years, had walked painfully to the campus to view the ruins. "Not a single brick or stone in those walls was out of place," he mused. "What kind of men built those walls so long ago?" Although Old Main had cost \$25,000 to construct in 1892, the building's value for insurance coverage was \$111,500. The Presbyterian Board of Education promised \$33,000, and the Church promised \$100,000. But replacement would cost nearly \$400,000.

In death, Old Main may have provided its most valuable service. It steeled Buena Vistas to make the greatest effort they had yet made

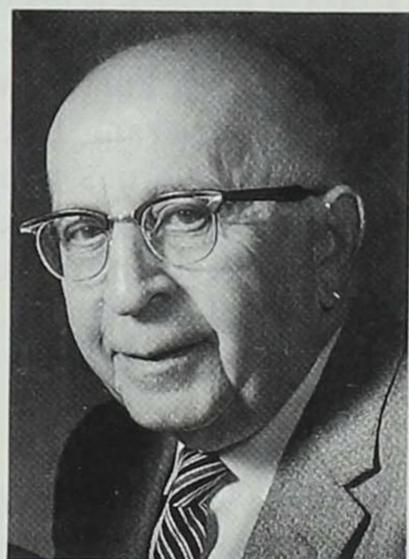
on behalf of the college and to fulfill the vision of the founders.

Obviously, the project of raising funds and constructing a new main building and a new chapel dominated the last part of Fisher's six-year term at Buena Vista. Lumberman and trustee Paul Dixon drew the plan for the new building, but Fisher, assisted by Wesselink, designed its interior office and classroom space. Wesselink remembered that "many long hours were spent at Jack's kitchen table drawing up the floor plans." Although they were not architects, little of their work had to be altered.

Construction of the new administration building started early in 1957 and was completed by the time classes opened in the fall of 1958. The half-million-dollar structure with its spacious, functional rooms seemed a luxury to those who had wrestled with the creaking stairs and falling plaster of "beloved" Old Main. About the only similarity was that the new building still offered a sweeping view of the lake and campus. The new Georgian colonial structure was ultimately named Dixon-Eilers Hall in honor of Trustee President Paul Dixon of Sac City, and Trustee Tom D. Eilers, president of the World Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska.

Nevertheless, Old Main refused to die. The stone archway was so rich in memories that Wesselink disassembled it piece by piece, numbered each stone and brick, and reassembled it southeast of the new building. Students and alumni, assisted by administration, headed the reconstruction project. In the mid-1980s the arch was again moved, this time above the new underground Siebens Forum in the center of the campus. Academic processions continue to pass through the arch, a symbol linking the past and present.

As prominent banker George J. Schaller, once a student in the college's commercial department, watched the resurrection of the college, he saw more than ever its importance to the Storm Lake community and its possibility of a promising future. Having acquired a fortune in banking and real estate, Schaller presented a challenge gift of \$125,000 in late 1958 to construct a new chapel. Fisher used the gift to formulate his Design for Learning Plan,

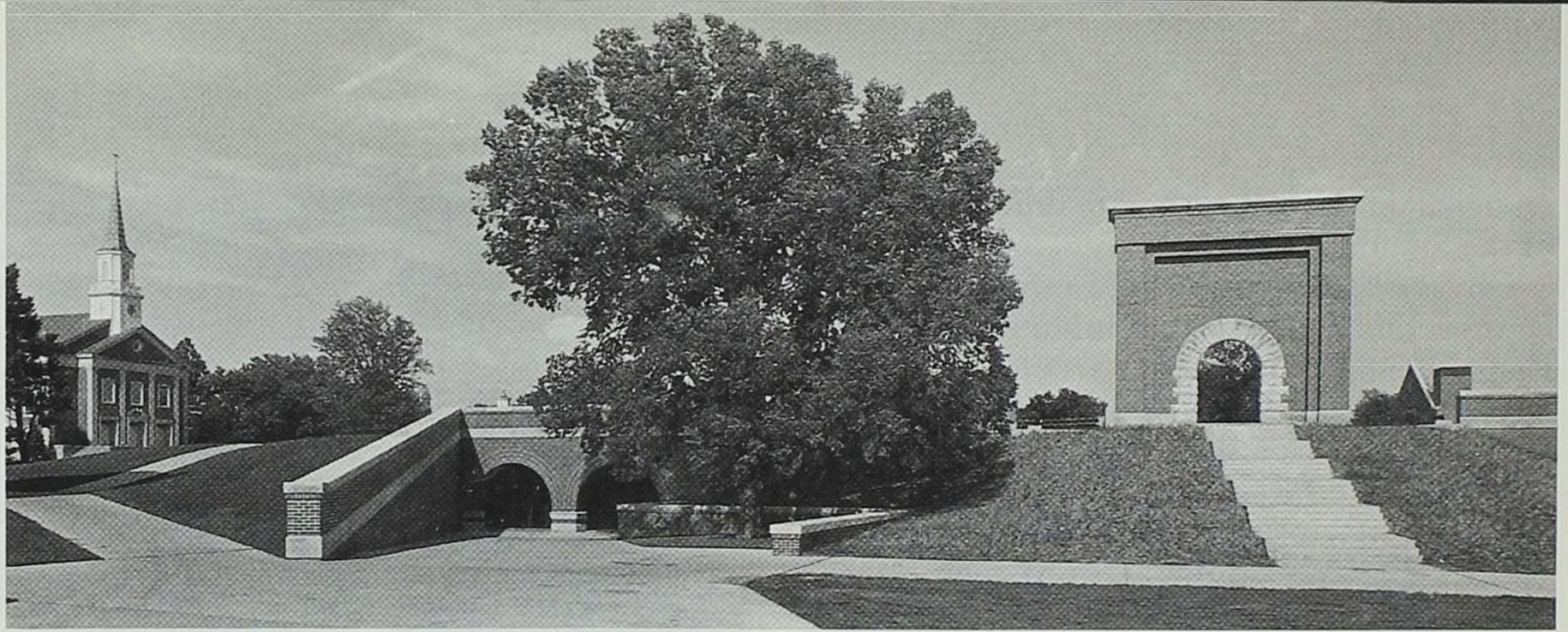


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Clockwise from upper left: Fisher's predecessor Henry Olson guided the college through the throes of the Great Depression. William D. Wesselink, Dean of Faculty during Fisher's presidency, worked with Fisher on building plans. Albert Hirsch, language professor, and George F. Reynolds, history and political science professor, were among many outstanding faculty during Fisher's era.

expanding his pre-fire building program to include a library, chapel, campus center, and more dormitory space.

The monumental problem of virtually raising the college from the ashes never deterred Fisher from exploiting developing technology and pioneering new methods of study. Encouraged by Bill Parks, a rather flamboyant professor of business administration and a former Boston attorney and Boston University teacher, the college introduced IBM data-processing machines in 1959. *The Tack* boasted, "Buena Vista is believed the first college in the United States in such a program of instruction." Installed under the IBM Educational Contribution Program, each machine included a card punch to record data on cards, a sorter to arrange facts, and an accounting machine to



The Old Main arch still graces the Buena Vista campus, on the west side of the "Forum," or Harold Walter Siebens School of Business, a 100,000-square-foot underground facility. On far left: Schaller Chapel.

print results. Parks was to teach the courses in the new program, but he soon left the college and the machines were left to gather dust. A young undergraduate, Charles Slagle, tinkered with the new technology; years later as a member of the faculty, he would introduce the first computer course at the college.

**F**ISHER had been president for six years when in the spring of 1960 he decided to accept a new challenge at Jamestown College in North Dakota. His six-year tenure had seen Buena Vista survive and march into a new position of respectability. The area press began to acknowledge that Buena Vista College "isn't the one-horse college as some of us may have thought, but it's a fully accredited school that can take its place among the colleges of the state and the nation." Fisher had generated more financial support for the institution than any of his predecessors, and the new equity of the institution had nearly tripled during his administration. The size and quality of the faculty had been increased, student enrollment had grown, the liberal arts heritage had been maintained, and Fisher and Wesselink had led the college community as it hacked a path through adversity. Fisher's successors Wendell Q. Halverson and Keith G. Briscoe would have a model to follow.

After Fisher's death at age sixty-four in 1974, his widow, Ruth Ann, returned to Storm Lake to live. There she could see a new generation of students study in a growing physical plant, benefit from gifts and an endowment (which under Briscoe's leadership would reach thirty-

five million dollars by 1990), and discover new programs, technology, and curricula hitherto unrealized or deemed unreachable in this small college. A young, vigorous faculty, mostly armed with Ph.D.'s, would arrive. The horizons of the institution moved far beyond northwestern Iowa as its commitments became global. Buena Vista faculty would watch revolutions in Bucharest, walk across Tiananmen Square, lecture in Tokyo and Sappuro, Japan. New languages would echo across the campus and Buena Vista students would study and travel abroad. There seemed to be no boundaries to the progress of Buena Vista College.

The burning of Old Main remains etched in the memories of those whose lives have been touched by Buena Vista. It is where the college's modern history begins. It is the reference point between the old and new Buena Vista. It was the moment when the future of the institution was forged. President Jack Fisher did not stand alone as he rallied his forces in the September dawn of a wrecked campus, but it was his moment of courage, his daring hope, his faith and his decisiveness that inspired both campus and community. The big man with the cigar had left his mark. There would be no turning back. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is adapted from the author's new centennial history of Buena Vista College, available from Iowa State University Press this spring. The book is a large-scale revision of Cumberland's earlier college history.

Sources used here include issues of *Buena Vista Today* and *The Tack*; college catalogs, yearbooks, press releases, and minutes of the board of trustees; letters and interviews; William H. Cumberland, *The History of Buena Vista College: Education for Service* (1966); and the *Storm Lake Pilot-Tribune* and *Storm Lake Register*.