

The way it was: Backer Memorial, 1956-current

Sean Kickham
Features Editor
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From its inception to 1956, St. Louis U. High began as the I-shaped main building then added on the Currgan Room, Rec Room, and gym.

After that, even more renovations occurred at SLUH. In the late sixties the Student Chapel was redone.

A wall was put up under the arch that leads to the sanctuary, separating the chapel into the North Hall and The Blessed Sacrament Chapel. The North Hall was used as a meeting area and was no longer a chapel, but students did have daily Mass there with the altar set up along the east or west wall, according to Vice President of Advancement Thom Digman.

Digman also noted some traditions involving the North Hall and Blessed Sacrament Chapel, including sports teams making “a visit to the chapel before they headed out to compete. And then at the end of our matches. ... It was a big part of the experience. ... The football game’s over and everybody follows the team back to the school and we all assemble in the North Hall and have a little prayer service.”

When the chapel was converted into the North Hall, the choir loft (located at the current English department) was converted into a “long, skinny, ugly classroom—because it didn’t have any windows,” unlike the English office today, according to Digman.

Next came the Robinson Library. Initial construction to move the library from rooms M201 to M209 down to its current location started in the early seventies. A steel strike unfortunately delayed construction. With the library unfinished, all the books were placed in the cafeteria as a temporary library, according to history teacher Jeff Harrison, S.J., ’75, who teaches some of the history of the SLUH building to his juniors. During construction Harrison and his classmates had to eat lunch in the auditorium, the location of the present main office/commons area.

The strike eventually ended and the library was finished in the mid-seventies. Originally built on pillars, there was no coaches’ commons or team room beneath it. Instead, it was just an open recreational area.

“It was all open space down there,” said Tom Brandy, a painter for SLUH who has worked here on and off (mostly on) since the mid 1940s. “It was real nice. Kids in wrestling used to go down there and train, stretch, whatever. ... All concreted off, all smooth.” It was also a good place to smoke after school.

He continued, “When you go down the steps (below the bay window of the library), and if you look off to the left, you’ll still see some of the original version. There are wooden benches down there.”

That open breeze area was, of course, made into the coaches’ offices and team meeting room we know today.

Around the same time that open area was closed off, the school put in the visitors’ locker room and teachers’ locker room on the north side of the hall leading into the gymnasium, according to Brandy.

The student locker room has undergone its own share of changes as well. After moving from the center of the school down to its current location, the southern half of the locker room closer to the gym was at first used as the weight room. Then the weights were moved to the dry room (where the football team keeps its equipment between the chin-up bar and computer labs) and lockers were put in, according to Brandy. The showers were refurbished, and new lockers replaced rusty, worn-out ones.

The next renovations happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s under then-president Tom Cummings, S.J.’s Enrichment, Expansion, and Endowment plan.



The SLUH campus in 1956 in its pre-library and theater days.

“The two problems I faced as a young president was that it was a violent neighborhood, so I had to look out for that real carefully, and we were land-locked,” said Cummings. “Those were the two operatives we looked from.”

To help secure the school, the administration put iron bars on some of the windows in the school and “bought up that extra acreage and surrounded it with fencing,” said Cummings.

“Then we would have a kind of oasis of secure land.”

To solve the land-locked problem, Cummings “decided to start motivating the building of the football stadium,” which was completed in 1980. Before that, SLUH first used SLU’s Walsh Stadium as its home field and later Gateway Tech’s field because there were no bleachers on the upper field, where the football players practiced.

“So basically there were a few houses but also part of what was then the parking lot at Stan Musial and Biggies, which was a restaurant there,” said Cummings. “In the meantime, we started buying up key houses in the neighborhood but on a modified scale.”

He continued, “We didn’t go through a lot of different architects and contractors but we were on the spot. ... We wanted to save money. So the students, the dads, and I dug out that whole hillside so we could get a width big enough for the whole football field. Huge job, but we did it ourselves. That’s why they kid me about building the field.”

They moved the maple trees that were at the bottom of the hill to alongside Oakland Ave. where they still thrive today. They also built the bathroom/storage complex on the southwestern corner of the stadium.

According to Cummings, the school’s property increased from 8 acres to 15 acres during his term as president, “so we thought we were land rich,” he said.

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“Another thing Mr. Manker and I did was, besides the hallways being so narrow, they also had these old lockers,” said Cummings. New, quieter, colorful lockers that formed sort of a modern art mural replaced the old ones. “It really kind of spiced up the halls,” said Cummings.

The chapel itself was changed back into the Student Chapel in this time period when the wall was knocked down separating the North Hall and the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. “All that beautiful statuary and that altar and everything was behind plywood walls,” said Cummings. “It got too informal. There was no majesty anymore. So we had to knock down all those walls.”

The chapel was then redecorated with the guidance of art teacher John Mueller. Purple carpeting was placed up the side walls for not only aesthetics but also acoustics, according to Cummings. Purple tapestries were hung from the ceiling to cover the ugly skylights. The pews were taken out and used in the hallways around the school and were replaced with individual chairs as today.

“Then when I came as principal in the nineties the side walls weren’t very well lit,” explained consultant to the president Robert Bannister. “So we added some additional lights to light up the back, and we added some to the side walls so that, for example, where the senior banner hangs, (light) was there. The idea was also to put another banner on the other side, it just never got (started).”

The crucifix and statuary have pretty much remained the same since the school was first built.

In 1982, the switchboard was moved to its current location from its previous location near room J124, sealing the original main entrance to the chapel. The side entrances to the chapel were made at this time as well.

The period from 1992 until 1996 saw major renovations throughout the entire school.

Said Digman. “That’s when we took over the front portion of the building here, the Jesuit residence ... and we moved the community over across the alley into the houses.”

As the years went on,” said Brandy, “the (number of) Jesuits started dropping off,” so they moved into the houses in the neighborhood. The J-wing was used for theology classrooms and the theology department on the first floor, art studios, and the *Prep News* office on the second floor, and the administration’s offices on the third floor. The basement of the J-wing was used as living quarters for lay SLUH employees, according to Brandy.

Digman noted that almost every part of the school was renovated during that time. “All of the systems: heating, air conditioning, electricity. All the classrooms were renovated. (We) put in the brand new windows (and) brought in the fiber optic cables. ... We moved the offices into the auditorium then built the music and the

Danis lobby. We completed that all in ’96.”

The tiers were taken out of the science rooms so each room could be used for lecture and lab.

The current computer labs were first built at that time, according to Digman, taking away from the Rec Room area.

The computer rooms replaced music instructor Joe Koestner’s choral room before the current band room was created. The choral room took over the areas in the Rec Room that used to be devoted to smoking and Wall Ball, according to Brandy.

Said Brandy, “The senior smoke room was put in in the late fifties. ... They got tired of the kids, of reprimanding them for stealing smokes (in the halls) and trying to hide them, so they just built a smoke room instead of jugging them all the time.”

Other changes included the principal’s office, along with the history department, pastoral office, counseling office, etc., moving into the middle of the school in their present locations.

Previously, the administrators’ offices were scattered throughout the school. The principal’s room used to be located on the second floor where the central western staircase is.

“(There), you’ll find wall switches,” said Bannister. “(The school) needed to again meet code and they had to have another set of stairs going down. And so they basically (moved) the principal’s office downstairs and they took the floor (in that area) and they cut that (staircase) in. So if you and see this big bay window and all of that and you think to yourself this is a really unusual arrangement, that’s because it was the office.”

The main office area, of course, took the place of the auditorium. Thus, the theater was built, taking the place of a

parking lot and garage.

Along with the Danis Lobby and band and music rooms, the theater was finished in 1996, completing the ’92-’96 renovations.

Vision 2000 began in 1998, according to Digman. Although it was not envisioned as part of the original plans, the Stephen R. Pettit Fitness Center was dedicated in 2003.

Before the basement was dug out and the weight room constructed it was just crawl space. “We had to actually (go) in from the alley and cut into the basement from the wall. So they dug a ramp from the alley down into the basement,” said Digman. They found, however, that “all the concrete had spalled away and we would not have known that unless we would have excavated down. ... We basically saved the school because of it.”

Summing up V2K, Digman said, “First and foremost, most of everything that we have done has been to provide a better educational opportunity for the young men that are here. ... (But) we ended up taking away from the students the sort of congregating (hangout spaces).” V2K is meant to improve “the fun aspect of going to school here.”

PHOTO FROM 1979 DAUPHIN YEARBOOK



Construction of the stands of the stadium (1979).