

Appreciation of Villard Hall was high in its day

By Paul Halvorson
Emerald Contributor

To most of today's University students, Villard Hall, the second oldest building on campus and the oldest building in Oregon built with public funds, is just another place to attend class.

But to students of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was a central locale of their University experience.

Construction began during 1885 and finished in 1886 at a cost of \$18,820. Villard Hall was a welcome sight for the overcrowded, one-building (Deady Hall) University.

There, in its auditorium, students would gather weekly for extracurricular activities like student-body meetings, club sessions and the then-popular debating matches.

Every May the students utilized the exterior of Villard Hall for "King of the Mountain" or what they called "Class Rush," said University archivist Keith Richard. "Class Rush" was a battle for the control of Villard Hall's roof that physically pitted class against class in a barbaric showdown of strength.

For each student, it was a chance to put their books and notes away and to bring out their fists and weapons. "They were serious, (in) the photographs I have showing them, (they) have huge clubs and ... bats to fight people off," Richard said.

Students knew that they might get hurt in this free-for-all, but they also knew that if their class successfully controlled Villard Hall they were entitled to a year's worth of bragging rights, Richards said.

"The freshmen would decide ... that they would go up to the roof at night and spend all night up there. Then the next day the other classes would see the freshmen up there, and then they would charge the roof, and then they would fight all day for the control of the tower," Richard said. "And then whoever had control of the tower at sundown were the champions until the next challenge, sometime in May of next year."

These brutal Class Rushes were terminated by the University's fourth president, Prince Lucien Campbell (PLC Hall), in 1902-1903 after he saw one in action, Richard said.

Campbell felt that if the students had so much extra energy they could put it to better use, Richard said. And so he replaced the popular event with University Day — a holiday on which the students' energy went toward putting in sidewalks, installing irrigation pipes and building tennis courts.

In contrast to the students' lively use of Villard Hall, the community used it for the solemn occasions of several funerals, Richard said. One of those funerals was that of Professor Thomas Condon (Condon Hall), a popular Geology professor who'd taught at the University since its inception in 1876.

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— Keith Richard

Richard describes Condon's funeral service as being impressive. "When you think about what they did ... his home was downtown somewhere near where the Register-Guard is today. They brought the coffin on carriage down to Villard, carried it up to the second floor, held the service (and) took it down," Richard said.

"There was a huge throng of people. On a carriage (they) took it all the way out to the Mesonic cemetery where it was buried."

The building is named after the University's first benefactor, Henry Villard. The son-in-law of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and himself a successful railroad man, Villard first learned of the University in 1881, while reading in *The Oregonian* about the school's possible closure.

Described by Richard as a "very liberal person," Villard showed his concern for Oregon's higher education by donating \$7,000 toward the mortgage of Deady Hall.

Among his other future donation was \$50,000 worth of bonds in his Pacific Northern Railroad company. The University's library still collects "around \$400 dollars a month" from these bonds, which will come to maturity toward the end of this century, Richard said.

Currently one of Villard's towers is being remodeled with private money, but Richard says there are no funds right now for the other three towers. He was given a rough estimate of \$1.5 million to completely restore the exterior of Villard Hall, an offer he calls unacceptable.

Though not in perfect shape, Villard Hall is still one of only four National Historic Landmarks in Oregon and an active University building, housing the University's Speech and Drama department.

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At the end of the 19th century, Villard Hall roof fights determined class victors.

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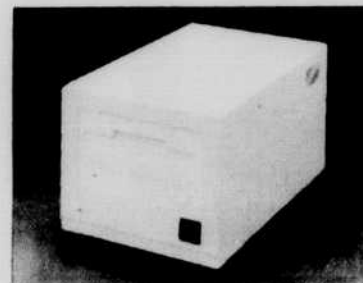
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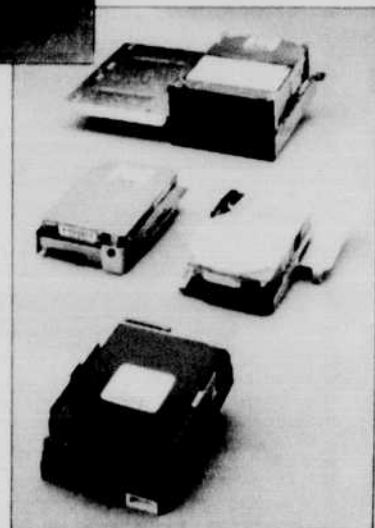
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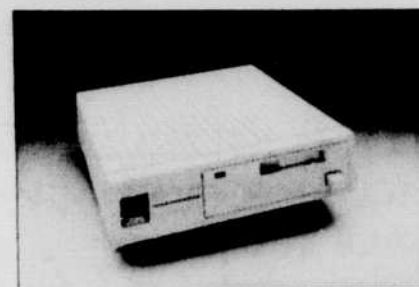
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