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Building Traditional College Life: Brockport from 1945 to 1955

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HST 390.03
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Building Traditional College Life:
Brockport from 1945 to 1955

America has become fascinated with college life and the privileges that accompany it. The Higher Education in America has made great advances in the past fifty years. Many of these changes occurred as a result of the end of W.W.II. These changes included more privileges for students as well as recognizing them as a valuable part of American society when it came to such issues as voting on politicians and government policies. Such publications as the Port Huron statement later summed up the students' goals of the era. These same goals were very much present Brockport Teachers College. Post W.W.II Brockport saw many changes as the school began to expand its boundaries and the students began to take control of their own organizations and clubs that had not existed previously. Everything was affected by this change, from building new dorms to the addition of new sports teams to the building of a student union. All the aspects of college life that we view as being part of the "traditional life" were established during this time period. My ideas for this

paper are based on evidence found in the school archives, which begin to explain the course of action these changes took at Brockport and if these events coincided with similar events occurring around the nation.

From March Madness to wild fraternity parties such as ones portrayed in the movie Animal House, college seems to be the ideal life where fun times are abounding and consciences are minimal. Students have always looked at college as a place to come of age and enjoy the trip. This experience today was very different than the one students in the early twentieth experienced. The college campuses began to evolve into the institute we know today in the mid twentieth century.

Brockport was no different in its transformation than any other school in the country. In the 1930's, Brockport had undergone the "Hartwell Revolution". Much had been gained but much also had been lost in the process. While new buildings were being erected, the traditions of the college were in grave danger of being lost. The abolition of such long-time customs such as Color Day and the fraternities and sororities, along with the new distinction of degrees left the school with a lack of spirit and traditionalism.¹ Everything from the classrooms to the statues and pictures had vanished even though they had been a long-time part of student life. The school

seemed to lack roots and soul but there would be change ahead as we prepared to enter W.W.II.

Do to the heated battles in Europe and the Pacific during W.W.II, the number of men enrolled in college dropped severally. Women made up the majority of students enrolled across the country and at Brockport. In 1944, 191 women and 9 men made up the entire student body at Brockport. All class officers and all staff for the Stylus and Saga where women. By 1946, 50 freshmen men had enrolled and by 1950, the school had 358 men and 257 women². Such a huge increase in men was mainly due to the government's new GI bill program. This bill stated that after serving in the military, upon returning to the states, the government would pay for that soldier's college tuition. It was also quite clear that the men had begun to take control of the college scene. New clubs such as the Rod & Gun club, Men's glee club, and social dance club began to pop up all over campus. These clubs where very well attended and always seemed to bring in a crowd. Men held the majority of student government offices and also controlled the editing of the stylus and the saga³. These new students needed something to do in their leisure time. Many of the veterans

¹ Dedman, Wayne. Cherishing This Heritage. New York: Meredith 1969

² Saga, 1944 to 1950

³ Saga, 1944 to 1950

had played sports in the service and upon returning to the states, needed some kind of physical outlet. So many of the students' petitioned to form a football team. Even though the vote to form the team pass unanimously several times, the school board continually shot down the idea. In order to form the team, students agreed to pay an additional tax in order to pay for uniforms and equipment⁴. The school board feared that the college would start to get away from their educational focus so they instated some rules that the team would have to follow. In order to form a team, coach Bob Boozer would have to agree to some stipulations. He would be unable to cut anyone who tried out for the team and he would be unable to recruit players from high school or other colleges. The first team was comprised of 158 players, mostly war veterans, and only 2 coaches. A sharp difference from today's 100 players and 10 coaches⁵. Along with football came other sports such as men's Varsity and Junior Varsity soccer, basketball, and gymnastics. Men also joined the cheerleading squad in 1948⁶. The attention that was given to clubs and athletics in the stylus and the saga had completely shifted gender. Before the war ended, women occupied almost every page printed. Now, the men's sports

⁴ Starr, Barbara. Football sports tax increased by vote of students. *the Stylus*. April 25, 1947

⁵ Leslie, Bruce. Interview with Robert Boozer. April 7, 1999

⁶ *The Stylus*, March 1948

and clubs each had a page dedicated to it while the entire women's athletics was confined to one page. This may be because at the time, it was thought to be unladylike if women participated in collegiate sports⁷. I was quite surprised to find that the students had a say in a lot of issues in campus, not big issues, but some the students felt they should have such as naming the football team. A campus wide vote was taken on what the team should be called. The "Golden Eagles" won with 46% of the vote while other names that were not chosen included the Braves, Badgers, and Golden Bears⁸. The Stylus reported that almost the entire student body voted for a name. Today we are lucky if one third of the student body shows up to vote for their government officials. One impression that I got from this research was the students during this era tended to appreciate the privileges they had more than the students on today.

The development of the Physical Education Program was one of the obvious differences between Brockport and other State Schools. Reasons for the new interest was due to the GIs who had been exposed to athletics in the service and wanted to do something on campus⁹. The program was started

⁷ Leslie, Bruce. Interview with Robert Boozer. April 7, 1999

⁸ The Stylus, March 1947

⁹ Leslie, Bruce. Interview with Robert Boozer. April 7, 1999

in 1946 by Mr. Tuttle who felt the program should model the program at Springfield College where he had attended. The program was skill based and students studied every phase of physical activity including camping at Camp Totem (see picture). The school constructed a 100-acre athletic area for soccer, baseball, and football. Tennis courts and a track were built along with a camping area and picnic ground¹⁰. As the school began to recognize the importance of athletics, they began to spend more money on funding these events.

Most colleges at that time practiced a tradition of *En Loco Parentus*, under which the school provided a watchful eye over the students in the absence of the parents. The school became the "moral enforcer" for the students and made sure they upheld the appropriate standards a student should display. This was also the case at the Brockport State Teachers College where dorm mothers supervised the student activities and a strict curfew was enforced in the evenings¹¹. This tradition was surprisingly accepted by the students and would remain unchallenged until almost the late 1960's. In 1947, the college agreed to grant late hours, which the students had wanted¹². The students were

¹⁰ Brockport College Catalog, 1948

¹¹ *idid*

¹² *The Stylus*, 1947

overjoyed with the new free time granted to them but their focus soon turned to what they would be able to do during this new time.

If they were hungry during hours when the dining hall was closed they would be able to use their meal plan at all the restaurants in town. Brockport contained a swimming pool, bowling alley, and large theater where plays and concerts would be performed in Hartwell, which students could use but these school facilities closed on the weekends and early in the evenings. Student turned to the school board to ask for extended hour on the weekends and a new game room and lounge to be built for their use. After many failed attempts, the school agreed to construct a lounge/game room, "The Bamboo Room", in the central building (Hartwell Hall)¹³. This is the first evidence I saw of a student union. Planned as the center of student activities, in 1952 the school erected a student union building which contained two large lounges, four meeting rooms of various sizes, two listening rooms, two guest rooms, a snack bar, a large dining room seating 250 persons, a small dining room seating 50 persons, a modern kitchen completely equipped with stoves, ovens, vegetable cookers, and modern dishwashing equipment. The second floor

would contain a business office, offices for student publications, and alumni association offices¹⁴. It would not be until 1962 when the school would build an entire student union.

One aspect that personifies the college experience is dorm life. The place where friendships are formed and students mature away from home. B.S.T.C. did not build dorms until the early twentieth century when the wings of Hartwell Hall were converted into dorms, but with the influx of students in the late 40's; the school saw a need to construct more dorms. The building we now know as Morgan and Lathrup were constructed in 1952. These would consist of four separate units of residence halls, which accommodate a total of 208 students. Each unit has, in addition to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and a reception room, a rumpus room in the basement, a laundry with electric washers and dryers, and basement corridor access to the Student Union building¹⁵. But these dorms were for female use only. The school offered off campus housing for some students and the Veterans club offered apartments to single vets or vets with spouses. To accommodate the male students who lived on campus, temporary Quonset huts were built to

¹³ Brockport College Catalog, 1952-54

¹⁴ Student Union, 1952, *author unknown*

¹⁵ Student Union, 1952, *author unknown*

house them. These huts have become infamous on campus as being "the most permanent temporary buildings in America". Building I, II, and III were built in 1947 in order to keep pace with the post war boom and stood until 1968. The huts were quite an experience. Building I held classrooms and offices, but had no plumbing and no reliable way to regulate heat. The closest bathrooms were in Hartwell. Building II was a U-shaped building with a hut at each end of it. The end buildings were science labs. Building III was strictly used to house students. The largest problem with these building was the regulation of heat in the winter. One professor tested the temperature in the huts by placing one thermometer on the floor and one on the ceiling. The temperature on the floor dropped to 58 degrees and the ceiling temperature could reach over 100. One way the school tried to fix this problem was to cut holes in the corners of the ceiling to vent the heat out. This worked but it also allowed birds into the building that would eventually become permanent residents. These buildings were built on the south side of the campus next to the train tracks. At this time in Brockport's history, 20 to 30 trains rumbled through the campus every day¹⁶. The professors found that they were unable to shout over the

¹⁶ Quonset Huts, Alumni news, 1984

trains so many of the classes sat and counted cars as the train passed and at the end of the week would be tested on the number of cars. Students would also figure out how much money the state was wasting with lost class time due to trains. The building did serve a very important part for the school. At the time, there were only 21 rooms you could hold class and also many of the professors felt it was good to get away from the administration the was in Hartwell.

When Dr. Tower decided retire in 1964, he looked back at Brockport and how it had matured since 1944. The school bore little resemblance to the one building campus of twenty years ago. The campus had vastly expanded west and south, and the faculty in 1964 was now as numerous as the student body in 1944, and the student body had nearly increased tenfold. Graduate programs and the entire school had been transformed from a single purpose institution into a multipurpose college not only preparing teachers but also instructing liberal arts courses. The student's life had been greatly transformed not only by increased numbers of students but also changing from a commuter college to a mainly residential college. The development of school greatly exceeded the expectations of Dr. Hartwell twenty years earlier.

Bibliographic Essay

The sources that I used in researching this topic were primarily found in the school archives located at the lower level of Drake Memorial Library. The main source I used in my research was publications of the Saga from 1944 until 1954. Many of the issues had little direct information so that left me to make many of the observations on my own. This came in handy when comparing gender ratios and clubs around campus. I had to count each male or female in their respective class and then compare the numbers. I only looked at the even numbered years so that I was able to finish my research in time. This only left me with a sample of the time period and hope that the odd years corresponded with the growth. The Saga was also handy in finding what clubs were formed and the gender ratios within thoughts clubs.

The Stylus proved to have little information that I needed but helped in placing events in a time line. The Stylus gave more accurate records of dates and member of clubs. The paper seemed to contain very few articles on school issues or the expansion that was occurring around the school. It did however, prove very useful in profiling the beginnings of the Football team at Brockport. So issues

also contained many articles on veterans attending school and what their accomplishments in the war were.

The interview of the original football coach, conducted on April 7, 1999, and given by Dr. Bruce Leslie, seem to provide information on the feelings of the staff and the attitude they had as Brockport was building to accommodate a growing student body. He talked about attitudes towards collegiate athletics and how the school adopted the new athletic teams. He discussed the beginning of the Physical Education department at Brockport and also the influx of GIs after the war.

A small hand out published in 1952 provided much information about the construction of the student union and what the new building would contain. Such items as a lounge and a snack bar could be found in the student union. The pamphlet also talked of the new dormitories being built for the female students. It even went into detail about how the new buildings were to be landscaped and lighted.

The school catalogues proved to be a wealth of knowledge about the programs the school offered and also the living conditions that the students would endure. Of course the catalog would have to make Brockport sound like a cutting edge college in order to intise students to attend. I can imagine that these descriptions of the

college such as the school Drama Theater and the swimming pool were greatly exaggerated. I was expecting this so many of the information that I accumulated from the catalogs were my own opinions.

The final pieces of information that I used in my paper were photographs of the school taken from 1944 until 1953. In these pictures you were able to see the progress the school was making and also see where the new buildings were being erected. The school had grown a great deal in those years and at the expense of many houses and farms. Some of the buildings do not exist today but from the photographs you can have an idea of the size of a State College in the 1950s and then be able to compare it to the campus of today. In only forty years, Brockport has nearly quadrupled in size.

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