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ISU's Old Main 'lives on' via professors' project

November 23, 2010 7:00 am • [By Michele Steinbacher | msteinbacher@pantagraph.com](#)



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Old Main Project

LORI ANN COOK-NEISLER

A photograph of Old Main is included in the display on the second floor of Illinois State University's Schroeder Hall. Illinois State University's Old Main Project co-directors Jim Skibo, professor of anthropology, and Gina Hunter, associate professor of cultural anthropology, talk Monday afternoon October 25, 2010 about the joining of the artifacts and the oral history of the building. (The Pantagraph/LORI ANN COOK-NEISLER) October 25, 2010)



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Old Main may be long gone from Illinois State University in Normal, but a new project reignites a passion for the first building at the state's oldest public university.

"It was a magnificent building," said archaeologist Jim Skibo who leads the project with ethnographer Gina Hunter. Both teach in the ISU sociology and anthropology department. "But Old Main is not gone. It lives on in the material culture left behind, and in the hearts of people who spent time there."

Constructed between 1857 and 1861, Old Main was the epicenter of campus until its 1958 razing. It was the main academic hall for campus and held its administrative offices, as well as other functions.

The three-part Old Main Project analyzes artifacts salvaged in 1981 from the site, at the north end of the quad, as well as historical documents and photos. It opens the door to an oral history project that reaches ISU's oldest living alums and retirees and offers a website dedicated to the site and work there (oldmain.illinoisstate.edu).

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In 1937, when Bloomington resident Dolly Vance Secord arrived, Old Main was the place she spent most time on campus — for classes, to meet friends, have lunch and check out bulletin boards.

"It was the headquarters, you might say, of our life on campus," said Secord, now 91.

For a year, Hunter and her students have collected the stories of more than a dozen ISU alumni living in the Twin Cities. Connecting personal stories to historical data can add depth to what researchers know about the building's story, said Hunter.

"Really, it's often the details from oral histories that provide information not found in the institutional record — items like budgets, ledgers and newspapers," she said.

For example, Secord and others recalled how the building's main floor hallways crisscrossed, and how that social meeting spot became known as Four Corners.

But by the 1940s, Old Main's structural integrity was weakening. Its signature dome and top floor were removed in 1946; 12 years later, the building was imploded.

Left behind were its foundation and intact basement, and artifacts in cisterns-turned-garbage bins. A 1981 excavation led by ISU's Ed Jelks and Keith Barr salvaged more than 40 boxes,

everything from broken glass bottles that once held liquor, ketchup and other edibles, to metals, ceramic whiteware, a make-up compact and pillboxes.

The collection, housed at the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, is being examined by ISU historical archaeology graduate student Jessica Griffin of Barrington, who also helped with the oral history collection. She is writing a thesis about her work and said the items shed light on the growth of the Twin Cities.

“There’s a whole commodity network,” she said, explaining how pieces show what students were buying and what local stores were selling.

“By looking at the brand, I ask, ‘Where was it made? When was it made? How did it get here?’” she said. The answers can link products that were shipped here via rail.

For students working on the Old Main Project, there are additional lessons, said Griffin. “In university life, sometimes students feel like they are temporary residents to a town. But this shows they leave a trace,” she said.

Skibo said he believes archaeological analysis will offer years more in research opportunities for ISU students. That in itself is a lesson: Students see that archaeology isn’t always in some faraway place.

“It’s interesting to turn the lens on ourselves. This is the archaeology of us,” said Skibo.

Digging into ISU

The Old Main Project began in fall 2009, bringing the campus’s first building back into the spotlight through archaeological and oral history techniques.

- The ISU sociology and anthropology department oversees the project, in partnership with Illinois State Museum, the Ethnography of the University Initiative, and three ISU-based areas in Milner Library, the Rayfield Archives and alumni relations.
- A glass display in Schroeder Hall’s second-floor hallway offers an exhibit on the work; online, visitors can follow the project’s progress at www.oldmain.illinoisstate.edu

Timeline

Uses for Old Main varied over the years, though it primarily served as classrooms and administrative offices. At one time, it also housed a museum, library, music room, art gallery, labs, bookstore, student newspaper and yearbook offices, as well as men's and women's lounges.

1857: Corner-stone laid by W. H. Powell and Jesse Fell.

1860: Classes first meet in the three-story building, topped with a clock tower. Total construction cost was \$187,000, nearly 20 times the cost of the annual operating budget.

1902: A storm rips off part of the roof, blowing down 11 of 16 chimneys and crushing the ceilings to the third floor. A new roof is installed and the tower restored.

1946: The dome and top floor of Old Main are removed because of safety concerns. A roof is put on the second floor and Old Main continues to be used.

1958: Old Main demolished because of advanced deterioration.

SOURCE: Old Main Project website, www.oldmain.illinoisstate.edu

ARTICLE TAKEN FROM: http://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/isu-s-old-main-lives-on-via-professors-project/article_ff825936-f6ca-11df-8112-001cc4c03286.html

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