

WINTER WINDS AND COAL PILED HIGH

Robert B.D. Hartman



When Henry Harrison Culver employed St. Louis architect Albert Knell to design what became Main Barrack in 1895, he insisted it be built of "brick, stone, steel, and iron" and that the floors be laid on a bed of concrete nine inches thick, "so that it is impossible for the building to be injured by fire."



Knell was also instructed to design an addition to the rear of Main Barrack to house coal-fired boilers to produce steam to heat the barrack and drive electric generators. The cadets were quick to name the two-story brick building the "Engine Annex," and it became the first service building in the Academy's infrastructure.

While its function was key to the Academy's power requirements, the location presented problems from inception. The foundation for the building was not well designed and the almost constant rumble of the electric generators resonated through much of Main Barrack. Coal dust and cinders further exacerbated the lives of the residents. Faculty members complained that their classrooms were always dirty and the manager of the adjacent Mess Hall was frustrated by an inability to maintain cleanliness.

Logistically, delivery of coal proved to be a major hassle. Since this lifeblood of the boilers had to be delivered directly to the rear of the Engine Annex, H. H. Culver struck a deal with the Vandalia Railroad to run a railroad spur from the main line directly to the power plant.

The spur extended southward from the main line beginning just north of the varsity baseball diamond (1963), and continuing west of the hockey rink (1974), behind the Recreation Building (1924), and along the east side of the Music and Arts Building (1940), down to the Main Barrack Annex. A switch engine pushed loaded hopper cars to the rear of the power plant, where the coal was dumped in a huge and unsightly black pile. Quite often, the railroad's rolling stock remained for days, thus adding a measure of visual insult to the campus.



A screen of barracks including Main, West, and East, plus the tabernacle/gymnasium, blocked most of the Engine Annex's unsightly view before the turn of the century. Projected increases in enrollment brought construction of South Barrack in 1904 and, when the student body reached 366 in 1909, contracts for the new Mess Hall were let.

To Edwin R. Culver, the creative genius behind the development of the campus, a power plant and coal dump in front of the Academy's new dining facility was unacceptable. He ordered the construction of a new facility well removed from the main campus.

In 1912, the Academy's second power plant (now the Music and Arts Building) opened several hundred yards north of the Mess Hall. Having learned a lesson in the design of the Engine Annex, Knell's new building included sound-proofed brick walls and concrete floor capable of handling the heaviest of generating equipment. The rail spur to the Engine Annex, no longer needed, was pulled up and the right-of-way converted to a company street.

By 1916, enrollment stood at 575, and the Academy was desperate for additional classroom space. The trustees authorized construction of three new buildings, one for the English Department, one for mathematics, and the third for the Commerce Department.

Ironically, the previous lessons of rail traffic and a coal dump adjacent to the school's academic center were ignored and the new academic complex was shoehorned between the Mess Hall and the power plant! When the natatorium opened in 1917, and the Recreation Building followed in 1924, even more traffic moved into the expanding northwest corner of the campus.

Despite the growing pressures of the Great Depression, the trustees authorized the start of construction on a third power plant in 1930, this one west of Academy Road. It was adjacent to the Pennsylvania Railroad's Vandalia Line and, for the first time in the school's history, well removed from the main campus.

Coal remained the fuel of choice but it left a less-than-desirable by-product, cinders, and they created a continual and vexing disposal issue. Cinders were used on parking lots, side roads, and on both the indoor and outdoor running tracks.

When they had been ground into dust by constant use, they were scraped up, hauled to the landfill, and a fresh supply installed. Not unlike the concerns expressed by teachers and the mess hall manager, those responsible for maintaining the Recreation Building complained about an inability to keep the facility clean and members of countless track teams will recall cinder burns resulting from falls.

By the late 1950s it was becoming increasingly difficult to operate the power plant efficiently. Equipment, some of it dating back to the 1920s, was aging, preventative maintenance had been allowed to slip, and skilled personnel to operate the power plant were increasingly difficult to employ.

The announcement by the Pennsylvania Railroad to abandon service to Culver spelled the end of the coal era. The Vandalia Line had served the lake community since 1883 and the Academy from its inception. It brought the first cadets to the Culver Park Hotel in 1894, deposited building materials at construction sites, transported Colonel Fleet and his cadets from Missouri in 1896, supplied coal to the power plant, moved literally thousands of winter and summer school students back and forth to Culver for more than five decades. Without the railroad how could the Academy operate?

The administration had considered, and then abandoned, the suggestion of using trucks to haul coal from the mine site in southern Indiana to Culver as both unreliable and budget-breaking. When an economically attractive proposal by the Northern Indiana Public Service Company was received, it won quick acceptance and brought an end to an impending crisis.

By converting to NIPSCO's low-cost natural gas, Culver was able to satisfy its fuel requirements for heating *and* abandon the generation of electricity by purchasing it directly from the utility's power grid. After nearly seven decades of energy independence from the outside world, Henry Harrison Culver's school-operated power system was abandoned in the late 1960s.