

YC

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Forbes Hall auditorium that night of the holiday concert was somber and subdued. Disbelief was the common sentiment after hearing the sudden news that South Dakota's oldest private college was officially closing its doors effective immediately due to its insurmountable debt. That night the final Yankton College concert, G.F. Handel's "Messiah," was accompanied by uncontrolled sobs and an encore of "Hail Yankton College" brought a lengthy ovation where applause was mixed openly with tears.

There would be no more classroom lectures; exams; Greyhound ball games; dances, theatre productions or music recitals. An educational institution and an entity that contributed immeasurably to the quality of life for many in the community — in sports, in theater, in music would vanish.

The seriousness of the situation came to light shortly after 12th YC president, Edward Couch was inaugurated earlier that fall. The decision to close was made after the grave financial picture finally became known after weeks of analysis and an in-depth audit. The first college in Dakota Territory was a victim of debt, small enrollment, an over-extended curriculum and no endowments. To save the school, estimations of raising nearly \$3,000,000 were determined necessary. The majority of the board of trustees thought the deficit was just too great to go on any further.

Couch admitted to the press, "The decision seems cruel from a human point of view, but from a legal and financial viewpoint, the trustees had no choice." It was a very sad day, indeed. Their yes vote put 118 faculty and other employees out of work, lost \$1.4 million in annual payroll in the Yankton community and forced 220 students to seek their education elsewhere (particularly seniors who scrambled for a final semester somewhere before they could enter the work force).

College recruiters from 28



A look inside Lay Library on the campus of Yankton College.

COURTESY PHOTO

schools arrived immediately hoping to expand their own college enrollments and help students. The South Dakota Board of Regents authorized state schools to accept YC students with a minimum loss of credit hours. Scholarships were lost and financial packages were at risk causing problems of one kind or another with the transfers. A flag on the soon-to-be-deserted campus flew at half mast on Friday, Dec. 21, demonstrating the traumatic period on the Hill.

An executive committee voted to file for reorganization under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. The campus buildings were padlocked, pipes drained and utilities shut off except at Ward Hall where Couch and a skeletal staff had the task of closing up Yankton College.

So limited were the cash resources, payroll could not even be met and the United Church of Christ membership stepped in offering their assistance by creating an emergency Relief Fund for the college employees. In times of need or not throughout the life of the college, the UCC member-

ship (many of them YC alums) generously supported the school, because of their close association since its founding.

Like a death in the family, many close to YC felt bitterness and anger, an early symptom of natural grief. But the vast majority responded with dignity and restraint. A few random acts of vandalism by students and some untimely finger-pointing were the exceptions. Legal entanglements and multiple claims arose from area businesses, faculty, students and even President Couch sued (who charged the trustees did not tell him how bad off the college really was when hired).

By the following February, one-third of the faculty had found employment and 90% of the students were transferred to other colleges (many opting for Yankton's Mount Marty College). As a special request, over forty displaced seniors returned in May to graduate from their alma mater on the YC campus for the 98th and last commencement convocation ever to be held at Yankton College.

Meanwhile, questions

were raised about the unforeseen financial crisis and those involved tried addressing them the best they could. One Christian viewpoint emphasized the remarkable value of the "Yankton experience" and its positive impact in keeping the Yankton College spirit alive even through future generations and that the years of fiscal giving from alums, friends, Yankton residents and the UCC churches were "not considered a waste (and apparently not enough) but a tribute of providing thousands of students with 103-years worth of educational excellence."

REBIRTH OF A CAMPUS

What would become of the 53-acre campus that was Yankton College? What were the possibilities of selling it intact and not all sliced up? The Yankton community and the trustees would dedicate themselves to turning a significant disaster into a future asset. Incidentally, other communities in the region were facing the same sudden closures, as Huron College, Springfield's Southern State College and Westmar College

were forced to close for similar reasons.

The possibility of the YC campus being used as an educational facility was not ruled out, including the ideas of replacing the liberal arts school with a vocational one or the Christian school proposed by the Smyth-Rike Corporation; but nothing came to fruition. Numerous ideas to utilize the campus were wrestled with and rejected.

As the disposal of YC real estate and personal property was underway in 1987, local businessman Don C. Peterson became the next YC president and remained tenacious to reviving the Yankton College campus, contacting numerous individuals, but with no success. His eventual call to U.S. Senator Larry Pressler initiated the connection with the Justice Department. Peterson did not want to depart from his objective to re-establish the college as it was or similarly so, but it became evident that the federal government could supply the necessary funds to keep the campus intact and maintained; as a prison site.

The Federal Bureau of

Prisons toured the campus and announced that with renovation, the campus could house Level 1 prisoners, only if the citizens of Yankton were happy with the prison situated in the middle of a residential district and close proximity to elementary schools. This idea brought instant reaction and a town feud ensued. The Citizens for a Better Alternative was formed forcing a vote calling for the city to buy the campus. The proposition was soundly defeated and the trustees authorized President Peterson and an oversight committee to pursue the possible sale to the federal government.

On January 1988, the trustees accepted a letter of intent to buy the campus from the FBP and filed it with the reorganization plan. A check from the federal government arrived for \$3,100,000 allowing the school to fulfill faculty and staff contract obligations, pay the creditors with allowable claims and the attorneys' fees. When it was over, the trustees had almost a million dollars left.

Yankton College had a chance for a new beginning (not without some divergent thoughts from alumni and trustees along the way). Yankton College would continue — with money — in a non-traditional way that was hardly imaginable in the dire days of 1984.

In 1989, Yankton College moved heaping boxes of its student records and transcripts, archives and memorabilia to a basement in a downtown Yankton building. The student-less institution was kept alive by three paid individuals and many volunteers. Dr. Willis Stange was appointed as the 14th president of his alma mater and led the charge.

Emphasis was placed on alumni outreach. The Bulletin, an alumni publication, was resurrected. All-class reunions were scheduled in an effort to keep alumni involved. Fundraising began to fund operating the office and to create scholarship endowments. The College Without Walls concept was created and successfully offered quality education in theology, drama, music and athletics. A Licensed Ministry Program was developed,

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INSTRUCT
ENCOURAGE
PRAISE
INFLUENCE
SHARE
GUIDE
INSPIRE

A Helping Hand

Whenever the need arises, you're always there to lend a hand, taking time away from your own busy schedule to make things better for someone else. You take pride in reaching out, in seeing other people smile. Your giving spirit brings out the best in all of us.

Thanks for lending a hand.

YANKTON DAILY
PRESS & DAKOTAN

