

Freeman Junior College

Freeman's Education Hub

For Decades, Freeman Junior College Served As Training Ground For Teachers, Nurses And Others

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For Vernetta (Schmeichel) Waltner, working at Freeman Junior College and Academy meant coming home. Waltner graduated from Freeman Academy in 1971. She remained on campus to attend Freeman Junior College (FJC) for one year.

The academy and junior college, both Mennonite-affiliated, operated on the same campus on the western edge of town. Freeman Junior College and Academy was founded in 1900 with classes beginning in 1903. The junior college closed after the 1986 school term, and the academy continues in operation today.

"At the high point, Freeman Junior College reached around 100 (students) during the 1940s to 1960s," Waltner said. "FJC was a convenient and cost-effective way for them to gain higher learning."

However, financial woes and a declining enrollment eventually contributed to FJC's closing, Waltner said.

"It was a heart-wrenching decision, and some people are still a bit unhappy about it," she said. "But by the end, enrollment had dwindled to around 30, and one cannot afford to run a quality program with those numbers."

A number of Freeman Academy graduates continued their education at FJC, Waltner said. However, not all of them finished the two-year program, she said.

"A number of us left FJC after one year, so we never graduated from there, even though we did (graduate) from Freeman Academy," she said.

After leaving FJC, Waltner attended South Dakota State University for one summer and one semester. She graduated from

Sioux Falls College (now the University of Sioux Falls) in 1975. She majored in physical education and minored in English.

She returned home to teach and coach at Freeman Junior College and Academy, and she managed the secretarial bureau. She has worked a total of 19 years for the academy, most recently as the school's development director since June 2006.

While Freeman Junior College no longer exists, its presence remains evident on the campus. A number of the academy's buildings were used by FJC and represent the historic past standing alongside the newer buildings.

THE EARLY YEARS

FJC began as "South Dakota Mennonite College," according to a historical article by John D. Unruh and Sam Steiner.

Mennonite settlers, mostly of Russian, German-Russian and Swiss origin, arrived in Dakota Territory



Pioneer Hall in Freeman was once a center of Freeman Junior College, which trained students from 1903 through 1986. The hall is still a vital facility for Freeman Academy, which still operates in the Hutchinson County community.

RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

school in Freeman. A board of directors was elected in December 1900, and a charter was obtained that month from the State of South Dakota.

Fundraising began, and construction of the first building — a frame structure costing \$7,000 — was begun in 1902. The building

was completed in time for classes in fall 1903, with dedication services held in October 1903. The campus expanded in the early years to include two dormitories, and auditorium-gymnasium and an administration building.

The dormitories were built in 1906 and 1915 at a respective cost of \$6,000 and \$4,500. The auditorium-gymnasium was erected in 1923 at a cost of around \$7,500.

After the administration building was completed in 1926 at a cost of \$60,000, two more buildings were placed on the nine-acre campus. First, a men's dormitory was built out of Army barracks, with two apartments for faculty members.

A number of FJC students needed lodging during the school year, Waltner said.

"There were dorms, but in the early years, students sometimes boarded with folks that lived in town — especially in the winter," she said.

The dormitories and other boarding arrangements reflected Freeman Junior College's large draw of students from a wide territory, Waltner said.

"Many students were from the greater Freeman area," she said. "But we also had lots of students from our sister Mennonite communities of Henderson, Nebraska, and Mountain Lake, Minnesota, and others that somehow found us through other persons connected with the Mennonite church."

Next came a new auditorium-gymnasium, completed in 1950 at an estimated cost of \$125,000. The building was named Pioneer Hall in honor of the early settlers.

Pioneer Hall remains an important part of the campus, hosting the annual Schmeckfest and a number of school and community activities.

Pioneer Hall contains a basketball court, which was a popular

sport for the students, Waltner said.

"There have always been some extracurricular activities. Basketball and different forms of public speaking have probably had the most longevity," she said.

"I just visited with some of the members from the classes of 1939 and 1944, and they said basketball was a favorite!"

HITTING THE BOOKS

FJC's curriculum evolved over time, according to Unruh and Steiner.

When the school opened in 1903, its courses consisted mainly of common school subjects and German. New courses were added as the school developed. The state recognized the teacher training course in 1911, and the academy was fully accredited in 1922. The following year, the school offered the first year of college work.

By 1927, the University of South Dakota accredited the full junior college course.

In 1950, the school offered a junior

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in the 1870s. Many of them settled in the Freeman area, seeking a way of maintaining the German language while offering some Bible instruction.

The desire intensified when Frederick C. Ortman visited various Mennonite communities in Kansas during the winter of 1894-95. Ortman noted the influence of Bethel College in training Mennonites to teach in the elementary schools.

He returned home, approaching Elder Christian Kaufman in the winter of 1899-1900. In response, representatives of various area Mennonite churches held a series of meetings. The idea of a Mennonite college grew in popularity, and the decision was made to build the

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