

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 87
Issue 2 *Spring 1998*

Article 17

April 1998

Final Period

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Recommended Citation

Gillespie, Robert (1998) "Final Period," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 87 : Iss. 2 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol87/iss2/17>

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'Bob's' Changing Face

Roberts Union has been many things to many people in its 50 years

By Robert Gillespie

If buildings were baseball players, Roberts Union would be a utility infielder. Year after year, Roberts has delivered in key situations—meeting the changing needs of generations of students. Originally the men's union when it opened on February 14, 1947, Roberts has been taken apart and put back together again and again. Where else does a bookstore sport a fireplace and a pottery studio rub elbows with a radio station? Current students affectionately call the building "Bob's."

In the beginning, Colby's infirmary occupied the entire east wing, a warren of beds and offices and exam rooms presided over by Dr. Clarence "Doggie" Dore '39, College physician from 1949 to 1981. From 1953 to 1964, head nurse Sarah McGraw Fortuine '26 lived on the second floor, "the sick girls' floor," said her daughter, Nancy Fortuine Westervelt '54. Professor Emeritus Bill Miller, who joined the Art Department in 1956, says she remembers "hearing stories of Dr. Dore carrying ailing coeds up the stairs." The men trudged to the floor above.

The original centerpiece of the first floor, spacious Seaverns Lounge, extended through archways along much of the corridor; studying and card playing went on around fireplaces at both ends of the room. Dean of the College Earl Smith, who joined the Colby staff in 1962 and became the first director of student activities six years later, jokes that he "went to Roberts to be where the action was." When student activities, located to the left of the first floor lobby, moved to the new Student Center in 1985, the Security Department took over its spot.

Major renovations of Rob-



Can you guess what now occupies this space in Roberts? Formerly a lounge, Seaverns Bookstore resides here.

erts in 1978 created a second ground-floor dining hall and new Spa facing each other across a dug-out courtyard and saw the bookstore take the place of Seaverns Lounge. Real logs in one of the fireplaces in Seaverns Bookstore still look ready to light, although operations manager Bill Pottle says the dampers are too rusted to use.

Nowadays, Personnel Services and the Outing Club occupy spaces in the old infirmary wing of the first floor. In the late '60s, the opposite wing of the first floor was home to the Paper Wall, a coffeehouse offering entertainment. In 1973 it became a pub; 25 years later, wall paintings are still visible between office partitions at the far end of the bookstore. At one point, East Asian Studies was in there, too.

Two of the original apartments immediately above were occupied by the late Administrative Vice President Roney Williams '35 and by the family of Bill Macomber '27, director of adult

education. In 1970-71, six women lived in this area of the second floor and six men lived on the third, "the second or third coed group in the Roberts commune," recalled one of the participants, Jon Linn '73. (This arrangement followed from limited coed dining in Roberts that began soon after women edged into Averill Hall on the men's side of the campus in 1964.) The Robbins-Hurd-Smith banquet and lecture rooms on the second floor of Roberts also housed men when bunk beds were moved in to handle overcrowding in the fall of 1979. "In today's parlance," said Registrar George Coleman, "they bonded in their adversity."

The third floor originally was a large, open area of pool and Ping-Pong tables, soft lights and cigarette smoke. In the 1970s, "the loft" saw Powder and Wig and dinner theater productions even after Strider Theater opened in 1976. Weaving and other crafts in the '60s and '70s also found a niche on the third floor as did a

nursery for faculty and staff children in the early '80s. Today, a long corridor gives passage to the offices and classrooms of the Psychology Department.

Down on the ground level a small portico has covered the side entrance since the day Roberts's roof let fly an avalanche of snow and ice on infirmary nurse Priscilla Sargent, but the barber shop on the ground-level corridor is long gone. In 1977 the radio station moved in, followed by the *Echo*. Across the hall the pottery studio looks as it did 25 years ago even after its recent expansion into a storage area.

"Fads come and go," said Bill Miller. "It's pottery now, not weaving." For a while it was photography. A darkroom on the pond end of the second floor awaits revival of the Camera Club.

The Art Department moved to Bixler in 1959, the infirmary to Garrison-Foster behind the chapel in 1976, the Spa to the Student Center (now Cotter Union) in 1985. Such changes were always anticipated: the Roberts Building, which honors Arthur J. Roberts, Class of 1891 and College president from 1908 to 1927, was designed for the coming and going of any number of student and departmental activities.

In the summer of 1999, Roberts will undergo another makeover when a wall between the two existing dining rooms comes down. Efficient serving lines and new equipment will relieve today's peak-period overcrowding, says Gordon Cheesman, associate director of physical plant. Back in 1947, the *Alumnus* declared Roberts "an essential cog in the Mayflower Hill plant." That, at least, hasn't changed a bit. ♦