

Memorial Gymnasium

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This is the sixteenth article written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. The topic for this writing is Memorial Gymnasium.

In 1925 the Rushville Lions were playing their home basketball games in the annex of the Graham School on Perkins Street. The annex was too small to hold all the local fans and visitors that wanted to see the games.

The Superintendent of Schools H.B. Allman and Principal Eugene B. Butler saw the need and the psychological momentum to advocate for a new gymnasium. The trouble was there was not money budgeted for such an undertaking, and raising local taxes was not an option. So at a post season recognition banquet in the basement of the Main Street Christian Church a plan was introduced to pay for a new facility with private funds.



A sum of \$26,750 was pledged in the form of non-interest bearing loans payable in two years. Another amount of \$40,000 was to be raised by the issue of bonds. A percentage of gate receipts and season ticket sales also helped offset the cost of construction. Rushville High School (RHS) students engaged in the project by raising \$5,000 in season tickets for the upcoming 1926 season. The total amount of building contracts to be issued was \$72,761. The final cost was almost \$80,000.

A holding corporation, the Rushville Athletic Corporation, was formed to cooperate with the Rushville City School Board in building the structure. The following citizens were on the Board of Directors: Dr. Frank Green, Roy E. Harrold, H.B. Allman, Roy Waggener, John H. Titsworth, John H. Kiplinger, I. Lee Endres, E.B. Butler, and Harold Pearce. The Rushville City School Board was: Allie Aldridge, President, E.R. Casady, Treasurer, and Warder H. Wyatt, Secretary. (Members of these boards changed over the years and because of the Depression and WWII the final payments on loans and interest were paid off in 1944.)

The architectural firm of McGuire and Shook was hired to draw up the plans for the new gymnasium. Shelby Construction Company was the general contractor with Hoosier Heating and Plumbing Company and Lucas and Tingle electricians as secondary contractors. The gym was built on Eleventh Street about six blocks away from the Graham School.



I always thought Memorial Gym was named to honor those who served in WWI. But it wasn't. It was named to honor all Rush County citizens that played a part in this example of community cooperation.

Memorial Gym was dedicated on February 5, 1926. A.L. Trester, Secretary of the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA), spoke at the dedication: "Don't let any fan be less clean than the players here on this floor." He went on: "We should dedicate this building too, to the fine spirit of fellowship

which you citizens of Rushville have manifested here.” Today the Mental Attitude Award in IHSAA boys’ basketball is called the Trester Award.

After the dedication speeches on February 5, 1926, the fun began. The first opponent to play against Rushville in the new gym was the Greensburg Pirates. Greensburg was intent on ruining the dedicatory game for the locals as they led at the half 23-11. But the Lions came back in the second half and took the lead with one minute left to play. According to the Rushville Yearbook (The Holcad): “Rushville had dedicated its mammoth basketball stadium with a victory of revenge over its ancient rival 32-31.” (The score was low because in those days there was a center jump after every made basket. A held ball or jump ball was tossed up at the nearest of three jump circles.) The coach of the Lions was John Milton Swain. Team members were: Gordon Arbuckle, Ryland Sherman, Lawrence Davison, John Wyatt, William Newbold, John Joyce, Henry Warth, Elwyn Readle, William Caldwell, and Loren Winkler.

In 1925-26 the Lions had a tough regular season but won their sectional by defeating Milroy 35-15. They then hosted the regional. Eight teams competed in the new Memorial Gym. In their regional division Rushville defeated the Shelbyville Camels 22-17 but lost the evening contest to North Vernon 27-21. (That’s right folks, Shelbyville was once known as the Camels!) In the other division Aurora was the winner.

The interior of the new gym featured a full size basketball floor with one ten-second line, a stage on the north end, tournament team rooms under the west bleachers, five rooms for a vocational school under the east bleachers, and a coach’s office and boys’ dressing rooms under the south bleachers. There was a ticket office at each of the four gates. For a short period of time there was a rifle range underneath the east bleachers!

The playing floor was elevated so there is a 3-4 foot crawl space under the entire floor. That’s why when a player falls or a coach stomps on the floor the reverberation is “drum like”. (Some of the modern era coaches that were stompers were Ken Pennington, Larry Angle, and Ken Stanley.)

The exterior of Memorial Gym was/is brick veneer. The metal lions in front of the gym had once stood at the Innis and Pearce Furniture Company. They were later donated to the school by the Pearce family in the late 1930’s.

Temporary seats were set up on the stage for the sectional and regional tournaments and just below the stage were three rows of seats at floor level. The original main backboards were heavy glass and the side goals were wooden. The electric scoreboard was a gift of George Davis, manager of the Rushville Telephone Company. Today the scoreboard is at the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in New Castle. The windows around the gym could be swung open from the top to provide relief when the gym was in “barn burner” mode.

Starting in 1926 Rushville won every sectional in their new gym for sixteen years. Then in 1942 Arlington ended the string when they defeated Morton Memorial in the final game 32-31. Arlington overcame a nine point Morton lead to win, and there were no seniors on the Arlington team.

Over the years there have been many outstanding teams from Rush County play at Memorial Gymnasium. I hope to give some of them due credit in a couple of future articles. But one of the most memorable teams to win the Rushville Regional was the Milan Indians in 1953 and 1954. Milan won a very controversial regional over Morton Memorial in 1953 only to lose to South Bend in the state finals. In 1954 Milan defeated Rushville 58-34 then Aurora 46-38 on their way to the semi state. Milan defeated Muncie Central 32-30 to win the state championship on a game winning jump shot by Bobby Plump. The movie Hoosiers is based on Milan’s journey to the title.

In 1926 the IHSAA did not have sports for girls; therefore, there was minimal local interest in girls’ athletics. There was a club at RHS called the “Olympic Girls”. R-numerals were awarded for points earned in

the club. They played some basketball games at Graham Annex against other schools. The first IHSAA Girls' basketball tournament was played in 1976, fifty years after Memorial Gym was built. Today the gym playing floor is named after legendary girls' coach Cinda Rice Brown.

The last 95 years have seen many events other than Rushville basketball held at Memorial Gym. They include graduation ceremonies, Rush County tournaments, Rush County Fair exhibits, benefit games, "Old Timers" tournaments, high school and professional wrestling, pep sessions, band and choir concerts, theater events, minstrel shows, convocations, exhibitions, circuses, and even funeral visitations.

In the early 1980's it was abundantly clear that Rushville Consolidated High School (RCHS) needed more space for athletic practices and contests. There was also a need for a new junior high/middle school and a performing arts center. So athletics was third priority and the athletic department was told by the school board that there would be about \$1.5 million for improved facilities. The coaching staff was given input on how to best spend the money and in 1984 an addition was connected to Memorial Gym. It included two regulation basketball/volleyball courts, a wrestling room, gymnastics room, dressing rooms, laundry area, storage, concession room and restrooms. Pull-out seating could seat about 500 fans.

By 1989 the "old" Memorial Gym was renovated. It was an extensive project that basically gutted the facility and repurposed the 1926 structure to meet the needs of both boys' and girls' programs. The renovation proved difficult because most of the perimeter interior walls helped support the bleachers. Access to bleacher seats was changed from 8 aisles to 18 aisles, and total approved seating dropped from 3,414 to 2,603 seats. The eight steel pillars supporting the roof remained and all the glass windows were bricked in. A new insulation package, new ceiling, new lighting, and air handling equipment were also added.

There have been attempts to add an indoor pool to the Memorial Gym complex. On one occasion the Rush County School Corporation, Rushville City, and Rush County were going to combine forces and build an indoor pool. The cost was estimated to be \$3 million. When the project failed to materialize, the RCHS Athletic Department started a swimming program anyway in 1983. RCHS swimming teams practiced at other schools' facilities, primarily Morton Memorial. In retrospect the decision not to build a pool was shortsighted. RCS recently dropped swimming from the RCHS athletic program.

The last addition to the Memorial Gym complex was dedicated on August 3, 2019, when a state-of-the-art weight room was added to the south end of the Memorial Gym addition. The 4,000 square foot facility was designed by architects Lanar and Beebe and cost \$1,018,000. It featured the same exterior design as the original 1926 structure.

The year 2026 will mark the one hundred year anniversary for Memorial Gym. I think you will agree for the most part it has definitely been a gym "for all seasons".

Sources for this article were Rush County Retrospect, the 1926 RHS Holcad, the Rushville Athletic Corporation Memorial Gymnasium/A Report – 1944, Rush County Sesquicentennial Edition, articles by former Rushville Republican sports writer, the late Bill Matney, and the Indianapolis News Indiana Basketball Record Book, 1976 Edition. Special thanks to RCS Superintendent Dr. Matt Vance and RCHS Athletic Director Melissa Marlow for their help.