

Building a College over 100 Years: New Mexico Tech 1889-1989

by Paige W. Christiansen



Old Main Building, 1891-1928. Old Main burned in 1928, but it was one of the finest buildings in the Southwest in its day. All that remains is the small back wing with the high chimney, now a part of Brown Hall.


There are two aspects to building a college, a curriculum and a physical plant. Curriculum development belongs in the realm of educators and academicians, the design and building of the physical plant is for architects and engineers. Unfortunately, when a hundred year period is under discussion, the job of designing and constructing buildings falls, not to a single designer, but to many. Each was subject to the styles, fads, theories, materials, technology, and failings of the particular historic period when the building was demanded by the college. Each was also subject to the whim, educational needs, and research demands of college personnel. To try to show some coherent and consistent patterns to the historic evolution of building New Mexico Tech from the first effort in the early 1890s to 1989, was impossible. Never-the-less, buildings were built, most with architectural support, a few without, most by qualified builders, some without. To attempt to generalize the architectural style of the New Mexico Tech campus defies the imagination. If one were forced to put a name on the process it

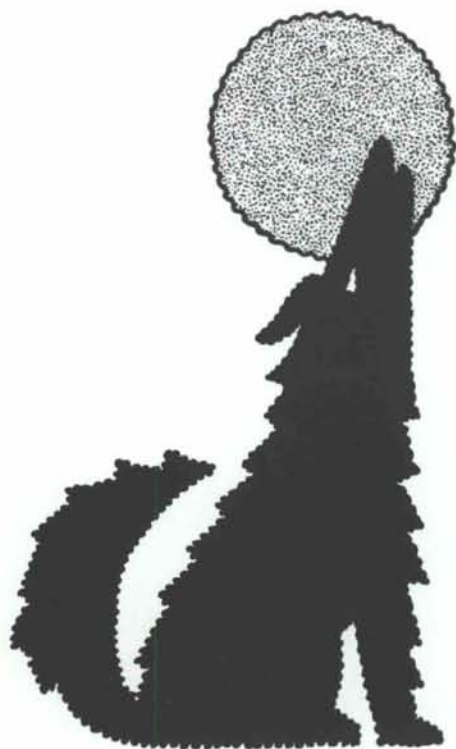
would require a completely new term, say, "Early American Hodgepodge," or "Box-on-box Style." That, however, would be grossly unfair, for there have been buildings and periods of building when careful architectural planning and excellence of construction were in evidence. The problem was one of consistency. Periods of careful planning and adequate funding were interspaced with periods of difficulty when shortage of funds forced expediency to supersede any concern for consistency in style. That fact sets the theme for any review of the growth of the physical plant at New Mexico Tech. By isolating special buildings or periods of development and giving them their due, insight will be brought into the process. Tying these together with some general concepts that have brought New Mexico Tech to its centennial year will complete a picture.

The first building at New Mexico Tech (known better as the New Mexico School of Mines until 1961) may have been one of its very best. Like so many place names in the Old West, the building's name was simply

descriptive. It was called "Old Main Building."

On August 12, 1889, twenty-two and one-fifth acres were deeded to the school for the sum of one dollar. The land was located in Upper-Sonoran desert on the fringe of Socorro, surrounded by creosote bush, cactus and desert grasses. The contract for the basement was let in October 1890 to Stephens and Faddis Company and the contract for the superstructure was given to Michele Berardinelli in 1891. The building, when completed in 1893, became a showpiece in New Mexico and the Southwest. It was built of gray trachyte quarried from Blue Canyon in the Socorro Mountains just west of the city. It was trimmed with red sandstone brought from Arizona. The rockwork was done by master craftsmen brought from Old Mexico. The roof was a standard tin roof so popular in the late 19th century. The inside was finished with oiled hard pine. The basement rooms were floored with concrete to handle the 22 crucibles and other furnaces in the metallurgical lab. The

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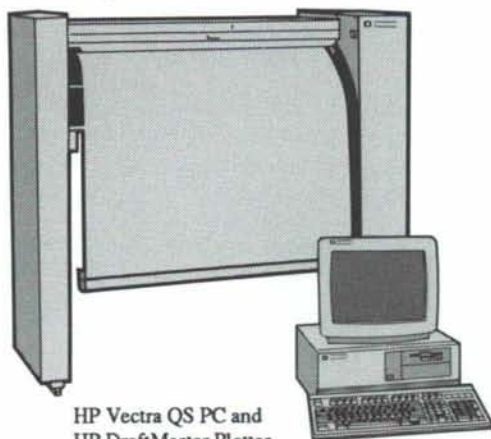


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