Pacific Bible Institute Once Owned an
Architectural Treasure

Wednesday, January 30, 1946 was not a typical day for the staff and students of Pacific Bible Institute. Classes were dismissed on that day so that the entire community could participate in moving the campus one and a half miles from 1095 N. Van Ness Avenue to 2149 Tuolomne Street in downtown Fresno. This new building was recognized by all to be a vast improvement over the cramped residential quarters the school had occupied for its first one and a half school years. Among its many features were an attractive open-air courtyard flanked by French doors and arches, a spacious auditorium/recreation room, elaborately cross-beamed ceilings, numerous fireplaces with colored brick and tile detailing, and what a Fresno Bee article had once referred to as "quaint little Juliet balconies" in front of the second story windows. But perhaps none of these features were as unique or unexpected in a Mennonite Brethren Bible institute facility as was the full-size heated swimming pool in the basement.

While almost anyone could recognize the beauty of the new PBI home, it is probable that few of those involved in the purchase and subsequent use of the building understood its full architectural significance. Completed in 1924 as a recreation building for the Fresno YWCA, the building at Tulomne and L Streets was designed by Julia Morgan, the most prolific and certainly one of the most renowned woman architects in American history. The designer of over 800 buildings, Morgan is perhaps best known as the architect of the magnificent Hearst Castle on the central California coast.

Julia Morgan was born in San Francisco in 1872. She began her architectural study in the School of Engineering at the University of California, from where she graduated in 1894. From Berkeley Morgan proceeded to Paris, where she intended to enroll in the world-famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The school did not consider women eligible for admission, however, and only after two years of examinations and competitions was she finally accepted, the first woman in the world to achieve this honor.

Returning to the Bay area after graduation in 1902, Morgan opened her own architectural firm in 1904. She first received widespread recognition within the architectural community when she received the commission to rebuild the severely damaged Fairmont Hotel after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Among Morgan's clients was the famous newspaperman William Randolph Hearst, who commissioned her to design Hearst Castle. Morgan also designed the Asilomar YWCA conference center near

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Pacific Bible Institute (cont. from p. 1)

Monterey, as well as numerous YWCA buildings in various cities and was the official architect of the YWCA in the West.2

Morgan’s involvement with the YWCA resulted in two of her designs being built in Fresno. In 1922 Fresno’s first Morgan-designed structure was completed, a YWCA residence home at 1660 M Street. Several months later Morgan came to town to discuss plans for a second YWCA building, this one to serve as an activities building on the corner of Tuolumne and L Streets.3 Ground was broken for this building in October 1922 and construction began in December of that year.

The 100’ x 150’ Activities Building was completed and dedicated in February 1924 at a final cost of $194,000.4 The structure was greeted with considerable enthusiasm by the local press. The Fresno Republican stated that it was “considered one of the best equipped plants of its size and kind in the United States,” while The Fresno Bee added its voice to the chorus claiming that “from an artistic standpoint, the new Y.M.C.A. Building is one of the most beautiful in the country” and that it offered “the most artistic surroundings imaginable.”5

During the decade following, its construction the YWCA Activities Building played an important role in the local community. The basement swimming pool was a particular focus of public attention. Rows of young people in bathing suits, graduates of the YWCA’s most recent water safety course, were frequent photo subjects on the pages of the Fresno Bee. The pool was also used regularly for less utilitarian purposes, such as a 1929 water pageant entitled “Mermaid’s Folly.” Numerous other activities were conducted on dry land. A 1925 YWCA brochure listed the following activities: natural, folk and clog dancing, marching tactics and gymnastics, in addition to the above-mentioned swimming programs. Those who had worked up a hearty appetite after an evening of marching tactics could retire to the Blue Lantern Cafe, a “tipless” cafe located in the same building. Yet another service was found on the third floor: the Y.M.C.A. Hotel, offering inexpensive lodging for young women.

All good things, it seems, must come to an end. In January 1933 the Activities Building was closed due to local YWCA budget reductions. For a time after this the building was used by the YMCA and later by the California National Guard, but also stood vacant for several years. At some point the building came into possession of the California Insurance Company, who were reported to be offering it for sale in 1941 at $42,000. In 1943 Samuel Caplan of Fresno purchased the building for approximately $45,000. The Bee reported that Caplan planned to leave the structure idle until the war’s end, at which time it would be converted into a hotel, hospital or apartment house.6 Wartime pressures, however, caused Caplan to alter his plans. In March 1944 the Fresno Housing Authority announced that the building would be used to house migrant civilian war workers, while in December of that same year plans were revealed to convert the upper two floors into a servicewomen’s overnight dormitory and lounge, which was opened in February 1945.7

In April 1945 Pacific Bible Institute, which had been searching for more spacious quarters to house its operations, happened upon the availability of the property at Tuolumne and L Streets. The property was quickly determined to be ideal for the purposes of the school. Not only was the price reasonable but the original design could, with no significant modification, accommodate the offices, classrooms, library, dining hall, chapel and dormitory space needed by the school. By May 1945 Pacific Bible Institute was the owner of a Julia Morgan-designed structure for the bargain price of $45,000. The building’s wartime uses delayed PBI’s occupancy for several months, but soon after the war’s end the school was able to take possession of its new home, moving in on January 30, 1946.

Despite its beauty and structural integrity, the building at Tuolumne and L Streets seemed fated to change hands frequently. Within a decade after Pacific Bible Institute acquired the building, plans were already underway to move the campus elsewhere. The conference Board of Education purchased a tract of land on the southeastern outskirts of Fresno in 1955, where they planned to relocate the recently-established Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminar and Pacific Bible Institute. The Seminary moved into the stately mansion at Butler and Chestnut Avenues in the Fall of 1956, though the Bible Institute remained downtown for a few more years. In November of 1958 ground was broken for the first building of the new PBI campus at 1717 S. Chestnut Avenue, which was dedicated in May of 1959.

The completion of the new building did not immediately signal the end of PBI activities on Tuolumne Street. The school operated on a divided campus during the 1959-1960 school year and the first semester of the 1960-1961 year. With the completion of dormitory space on the new campus late in 1960, the entire campus was moved to Chestnut Avenue during the Christmas break of 1960. The old campus was sold by the Board of Education in January 1962, thus formally ending any connection between the school and Julia Morgan’s grand building.

In 1964 the Tuolumne Street building was remodeled radically by the current owner. The third floor was removed and an entirely different facade placed on the outside. The building still stands today at 2141 Tuolumne Street.

(Con. on p. 4)
Heinrich JANZEN (1866) and Katharina REIMER (1867)
Jacob JANZEN (1865) and Karolina KOEHN (1861)
Johann KIEHN (1843) and Helena BLOCK (1846)
Peter KLAASSEN (1858) and Elisabeth BULLER (1859)
Cornelius KLIEWER (1869) and Elisabeth RICHERT (1870)
Gerhard KLIEWER (1853) and Maria EKKERT (1847)
H. H. KLIEWER (1852) and Maria RATZLAFF (1853)
Johann KLIEWER (1855) and Katharina FLAMING (1858)
Peter KLIEWER (1849) and Eva ZIELKE (1853)
Peter KLIEWER (1866) and Maria GIESBRECHT (1866)
Abraham KOOP (1867) and Eva MARTENS (1874)
Gerhard KOOP (1862) and Katharina JANZEN (1864)
Jacob KOOP (1864) and Ida REIMER (1871)
Thomas KOOP (1836) and Maria BOESE (1829)
Eduwart KREWALL (1869) and Augusta WEDEL (1877)
Abraham KROEKER (1867) and Helena BAERG (1872)
Cornelius KROEKER (1869) and Maria JANZEN (1873)
David KROEKER (1848) and Katharina WALLMAN (1847)
Franz KROEKER (1864) and Elisabeth SCHMIDT ( )
Jakob KROEKER (1849) and Anna NEUFELD (1853)
Peter KROEKER (1852) and Anna KLASSEN (1854)
Abraham LEPPKE (1862) and Susanna WIENS (1868)
Heinrich MARTENS (1867) and Elisabeth GIESBRECHT (1872)
Johannes MUELLER (1861) and Friderica HABERER (1863)
Aron NEUFELD (1858) and Sarah ISAAK (1861)
Peter NEUFELD (1838) and Katharina QUIRING (1838)
Peter NEUFELD (1859) and Maria PAULS (1861)
Franz NICKEL (1855) and Karolina DUCKSEN (1860)
Johann NICKEL (1864) and Katharina NEUFELD (1865)
Benjamin NIKKEL (1840) and Helena NEUFELD (1835)
David NIKKEL (1850) and Helen BERGMANN (1853)
Heinrich NIKKEL (1858) and Agatha KRAUSE (1866)
Jakob NIKKEL (1868) and Helena ESAU (1873)
Peter NIKKEL (1860) and Susanna KLIEWER (1863)
Friedrich NORD (1861) and Gertruda GOERTZEN (1871)
Jakob PAULS (1864) and Anna DYCK (1875)
Abraham PENNER (1864) and Helena JANZEN (1871)
Heinrich PENNER (1854) and Anna ABRAHAMS (1854)
Dietrich PETERS (1859) and Susanna BRAUN (1865)
Abraham REIMER (1860) and Anna FRANZ (1862)
Cornelius REIMER (1837) and Katharina KOEHN (1838)
David REIMER (1868) and Anna WEDEL (1870)
Heinrich REIMER (1869) and Agatha EDGER (1874)
Jakob REIMER (1856) and Margaretha BULLER (1858)
Jakob REIMER (1863) and Maria WEDEL (1886)
Kornelius REIMER (1862) and Elisabeth FUNK (1865)
Heinrich REMPPEL (1865) and Elisabeth WILLEM (1872)
Abraham RICHERT (1850) and Elisabeth SCHLABACH (1851)
Cornelius RICHERT (1832) and Susanna WALL (1842)
Jakob RICHERT (1849) and Maria KLIEWER ( )
August ROGALSKY (1858) and Maria BERG ( )
Abraham SAWATZKY (1858) and Cornelia FAST (1859)
Jacob SAWATZKY (1856) and Katharina REGIER ( )
David SCHAPANSKY (1849) and Anna BOCK (1852)
Samuel SCHIELBERG (1853) and Mina RIEWEN (1855)
Martin SCHLICHITING (1849) and Elisabeth RENZ (1853)
August SCHMIDT (1868) and Emiye ENGEL (1872)
Johann SCHMIDT (1858) and Maria REIMER (1865)
Peter SCHMIDT (1862) and Maria SCHELLENBERG (1871)
Michael SCHWARTZ (1844) and Wilhelmina SCHIELBERG (1845)
Heinrich SIEMENS (1859) and Aganetha HUEBERT (1859)
Jakob SIEMENS (1849) and Anna WILMS (1854)
Johann SPRUTH (1852) and Elisabeth BERG (1843)
Heinrich STOBIE (1856) and Justina PETERS (1854)
Eduard SUDERMAN (1866) and Agnes FLAMING (1871)
Eduard SUDERMAN (1833) and Maria PAUL (1833)
Heinrich THESSMAN (1821) and Anna HEINRICH (1836)
Cornelius THIESSEN (1856) and Helena KROEKER (1857)
Dietrich THIESSEN (1852) and Susanna BRAUN (1855)
Gerhard VOGT (1869) and Maria FRIESEN (1875)
Kornelius VOGT (1867) and Susanna WARKENTIN (1865)
Aron WARKENTIN (1830) and Helena FRIESEN (1834)
Aron WARKENTIN (1862) and MAECKELBURGER (1864)
Gerhard WARKENTIN (1868) and Maria HEINRICH (1868)
Johann WARKENTIN (1842) and Friderka KLEWER (1851)
Wwe. Heinrich WARKENTIN (1848) and ( )
Benjamin WEDEL (1856) and Katharina THIESSEN (1855)
Peter WIEBE (1852) and Maria DUECK ( )
Daniel WIENS (1859) and Katharina KOOP (1865)
Heinrich WOHLGEMUTH (1869) and Maria WEDEL (1877)
Peter WOHLGEMUTH (1866) and Elisabeth WIEBE (1870)
Alan Peters

(cont. from p. 2)

but is scarcely recognizable as the same structure designed by one of the most famous women in American architectural history.

Kevin Enns-Rempel


7. "Fresno Buildings Will Be Rebuilt As Housing Units." Fresno Bee, March 1, 1944; "Rent Rule Clears Way For Opening of Housing Units." Fresno Bee, December 5, 1944; "Service Women's Center Will Be Opened Soon." Fresno Bee, January 21, 1945.