

Gym was once state of the art

By JACK CLARK
For the Register-News

MT. VERNON — Changnon Gymnasium is now more than 71 years old, making it one of the oldest gymnasiums still hosting prep sporting events in the state of Illinois.

The gym is located on the campus of Mt. Vernon Township High School.

Originally known as the "new gym," the venerable building took on a new name shortly after opening.

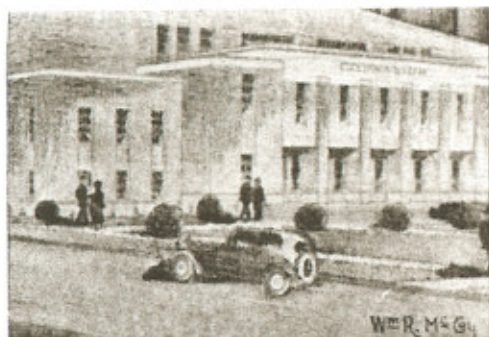
Vernois Gymnasium, as it came to be known, is one of three still-standing buildings on the campus commissioned to be built as a result of overcrowded conditions and a rapidly increasing enrollment. The other two were the current auditorium and what is commonly known as "A" building. The three were constructed with funding from a federal grant that was made available through the Public Works Administration, a branch of the federal government that had been established by then-president Franklin D. Roosevelt during the years of

1932-41, a period known as "The Great Depression." The actual construction was through the Works Progress Administration.

Mt. Vernon resident John Howard is a 1944 graduate of MVTHS. Howard was 9 years old when the gym opened in 1936. He said that even though he wasn't caught up in it, there was an exciting feeling about something new being built.

"I expect that there was," Howard said.

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An artist's rendition of Vernois Gym prior to its construction.

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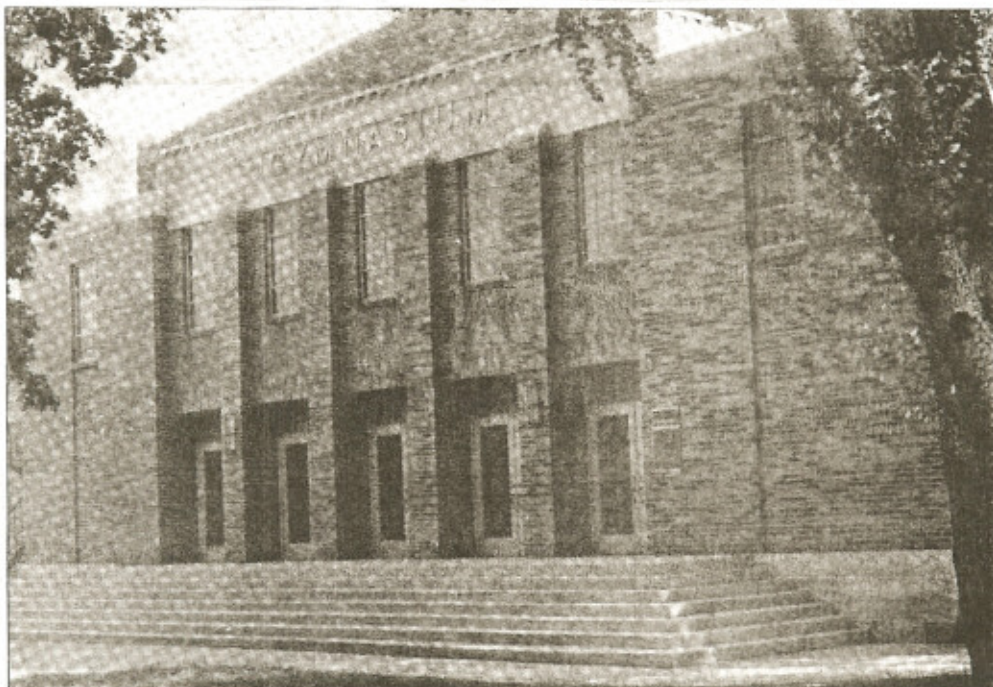
"I wasn't looking at it that way at the time, but I'm sure the adults did. Even if for no other reason than the fact that there hadn't been any other construction for some time, due to the Depression. Things were moving pretty slow."

This was a time in the community in which local politics were put aside. All community leaders worked diligently with high school principal Silas Echols and the Board of Education to secure the federal funding which would more than double the classrooms at the high school. Little did they know at the time that their decisions would also build what would come to be known as the home of so many sports memories for so many players as well as fans.

"I remember my brother taking me to the gym while the construction was going on," said Howard. "They had dug a pit where the floor would be. I don't think that it was the hardwood floor, but they had boards on sawhorses for the floor in that building. That was how the workers would cross the floor of the new gym, walking on those boards. I know that floor was right at the height of the ground around the outside of the building."

The architect for the project was William R. McCoy. Baugher and Palmer Contractors began their work on Dec. 15, 1935. The original plan called for the new buildings to be put in use during the fall of 1936. The brand-new gymnasium opened in December 1936.

Since the doors were first opened, the building has been the home to one of the top 10 all-time basketball programs in the country, in terms of number of victories. The boys basketball team has captured the South Seven Conference



The completed gym, now known as Changnon Gymnasium. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Championship a total of 17 times in 71 years. The teams have also won Regional Championships 43 times and were Sectional Champions in 16 seasons, as well as being Super-Sectional Champions twice.

In 1936, the Mt. Vernon team was known by a number of names, some of which have not been used in 70 years. Along with the familiar Orange-and-Black that won the state title in 1920, the team was also known as the "Black-shirts," the "Vernois" and later the "Rossmen." The latter name was in reference to their coach, Howard Ross, who is the all-time coaching victories leader with 271. The 1935-36 season marked the end of his coaching career at MVTHS.

E.R. Gragg led the team on to its new floor in December 1936. Mt. Vernon was 8-14 in its inaugural season in its new

home. The squad was 7-12 the next year.

Then came new coach Doxie Moore, who is reportedly responsible for designating his new team the "Rams," in 1939. The new moniker must have had a positive effect, because the Rams went 14-12 that season and finished as the runner-up for the Sectional Championship. Moore's next two teams made sectional tournament appearances, leading up to his 1942 Rams, who finished at 29-5 and were recently inducted into the Mt. Vernon Township High School Sports Hall of Fame.

The Rams won three state basketball titles while calling Vernois Gym home, within a six-year period of 1949-54. They also had a third-place finish in 1952.

And then there were those great teams of the '60s. The teams that carried on the

Rams tradition were led by Terry "Chet" Gamber, then Danny Hester, then Nate Hawthorne and Eddie James. Then in the '70s, the fans watched Ed Sanders, Jeff Wilson and Mac Thomas. During the '80s, Changnon Gymnasium housed four conference champions, five regional champions and two sectional champions, along with Troy Hughes.

And of course there were the teams of the '90s, featuring Jamar Sanders, as well as the Kent Williams-led super-sectional team of 1999.

Obviously, there have only been slight cosmetic changes to the gym over the years. But, it is interesting to note that a large part of the available seating remains unchanged to this day. As a matter of fact, the chair seats on the west side are the original steel seats. When the gym first opened, there weren't any floor bleachers.

When a large crowd was anticipated, temporary bleachers that were kept under the stage were rolled into place.

A former MVTHS superintendent, the late Dr. J.D. Shields, had a vision for Changnon Gymnasium if a new high school were ever to be built.

"J.D. had a dream that the gym would someday be used as a community center," said Howard. "Like a civic arena. But, still use the gym for physical education classes."

Whether or not Changnon Gym is ever "retired" from prep sports duties is a question that remains to be answered. Until that time comes, the "Snake Pit" atmosphere resounds. Changnon Gymnasium is truly a "sixth man" when the Rams and Lady Rams take the floor.

Seventy-one years of history. And the tradition lives on.



A crane lifts portions of the frame for what is now known as Changnon Gymnasium on the campus of Mt. Vernon Township High School. SUBMITTED PHOTO