

St. Olaf Cleans Up

By Jeff Sauve

Some boys were talking about the benefits of bathing regularly; whereupon one remarked that he always bathed regularly — once every year.

— Manitou Messenger, January 1887

MANITOU HEIGHTS WAS AN INTIMATE CAMPUS for the approximately 150 St. Olaf students in the early 1890s. Old Main, then known simply as “the Main,” contained sixteen dorm rooms on the third floor for thirty-two or so young men. The only other building on campus at this time was Ladies’ Hall, which accommodated fifteen young women. The remaining students resided off campus. Faculty and their respective families lived on the first floor of the two buildings.

St. Olaf President Thorbjørn N. Mohn and Professor Halvor T. Ytterboe delivered hygiene lectures on occasion. Ytterboe favored rules such as, “Don’t neglect to wash your feet at least twice a week” and “Don’t neglect personal cleanliness. Preserve your health. You have no business to be sick.”

Both men believed that certain improvements were needed on campus, including the installation of a bathtub where none existed before. Up to this time, the young men had raced down to the basement wash room for their morning ablutions. Grabbing tin basins from the wall pegs, they pumped the cistern and placed the basins in zinc-lined wooden troughs. All the while, breakfast was getting cold.

In the fall of 1892 three copper-lined bathtubs were installed in the Main’s wash room at an expense of \$45 plus \$1.20 for bath plugs. To offset the expenditure, Mohn had the foresight to have 3,000 tickets printed. Each read “Good for One Bath.” These tickets sold for five cents each or six tickets for a quarter. Bath tickets were later used by students on several occasions to gain admittance to events held in the chapel, which was located on the second floor of the Main.



Controversy arose immediately on at least three fronts regarding the advent of the bathtubs.

Residents of Ladies’ Hall complained of unfairness because the boys had tubs while none were accessible to them.

In addition, word spread beyond Manitou Heights that an extravagant marble tub was created for the use of Mohn and his students. A St. Olaf trustee confronted Mohn and was given a first-hand look at the copper-lined tubs, assuring him that high living did not exist at St. Olaf. Mohn informed him that, in fact, the sale of tickets more than paid for the bathtubs.

The final front was a group of young men, who, having been shown the new tubs, were taken aback by the ticket price.



Time for a head wash. This young man is getting his head washed in a tin basin located in the chapel room, circa 1888. (PHOTO BY O. G. FELLAND)

Mohn soon calmed the students down. Harold Kildahl, class of 1895, recalled in his memoir that at this same moment a student arrived in the wash room bearing an old-fashioned wooden tub:

Mohn inquired what the young man was going to do with the tub. With a thick Norwegian accent, the fellow stated, “I vant to bat.” “Well then,” said Professor Mohn, “you better go out to the baseball field,” and he laughed in his good natured way ... which we all enjoyed [and it] put an end to our altercation about the cost of cleanliness.

The tubs remained in use through the spring of 1901 when the new Men’s Dormitory (later renamed Ytterboe Hall) opened its doors, offering modern plumbing.

Mohn’s bathtub critics only needed to look at the meticulous account books. Under the heading, “Baths,” it recorded a total of 2,670 “Good for One Bath” tickets sold over eight-plus years — a splashing success. 🦉



Rub a dub dub...

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