

## **The House that Rockefeller Built**

**Anthony Borgo**

**tony@whiting.lib.in.us**

The Whiting Memorial Community House was a gift from the Standard Oil Company to the city of Whiting. The Community Center was built specifically as a recreation center for Whiting's populace. The primary goal of the Center was to bring people together without regard to race, class or creed. The erection of the Community House served as tangible evidence of the refinery's interest and commitment to the development of Whiting as a great city in the Calumet region.

In 1923, Standard Oil provided the site for the Community Center which is located at the corner of Short Street (Community Court) and Clark Street. In addition, the refinery donated \$300,000 for the erection of the building. John D. Rockefeller contributed an additional \$100,000 and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. added another \$50,000. Refinery officials made it clear that they were making this contribution as a citizen of Whiting, not as an employer. All planning, construction, furnishings, or administration was left in the hands of the citizens of Whiting.

The Community House was dedicated as a memorial to the Standard Oil employees who served in World War I. A. J. Parkin was named manager of the Whiting Memorial Community House. Parkin describes the dedication of the Center to refinery veterans in a historical article from 1923. "Grander monument by far than the artist's best in shaft of granite or tablet of bronze! This memorial will not only honor the dead but stand as a most practical means of inspiration to the living. For there is neither race, color, creed nor border when strong men stand face to face."

The two-story, red-brick building was designed as an adaptation of the Southern Italian style of architecture. Parkin further describes the structure in the same historical article, "The Spanish

tile roof has a gentle slope that surmounts the walls of rough texture brick in varying shades of red, laid with cream colored mortar joints.” Parkin claimed that the building’s design was inviting in its simplicity and dignity. The Community House was divided into three main areas. The divisions included an auditorium, a men’s department, and a women’s department.

The auditorium was located at the southwest end of the building. This arena to the arts had a seating capacity of 1,000. The auditorium stage was fully equipped. Behind the stage there were dressing rooms, scenery, and other facilities. The auditorium was used for dramatics, musical concerts, lectures, and motion pictures. In addition, several beauty pageants were judged on the Center’s auditorium stage.

The men’s department was located in the center of the building. Visitors could access this department through the main entrance on Clark Street. The men’s department included a spacious lobby, which contained an administration office and a secretary’s counter. Next to the lobby were the social and reading rooms. A wide corridor lead from the lobby to allow access to the swimming pool’s spectator’s gallery, a men’s gymnasium, and access to the women’s department.

Below the men’s department there was a locker room which contained shower facilities. There were also 8 regulation bowling alleys. The basement of the Community House also contained a dining hall, which had a seating capacity of 250, and the boys’ department.

On the second floor, there was a general club room and the Memorial Hall, which the American Legion used as their headquarters. The Memorial Hall contained trophy cases, as well as beautiful mural decorations.

The main entrance to the women’s department was on the building’s north end off of Short Street (Community Court.) The department, located on the first floor, contained a women’s social

room, a cloak room, a gymnasium and the director's office. In the basement, there was a women's locker room with shower facilities and a separate entrance to the swimming pool. In addition, the basement contained the girl's game room. On the second floor, there was a clubroom, which was equipped to take care of meetings and social events for the various women's organizations throughout the city.

The operation of the facility was put in the hands of a board of directors, which consisted of 11 individuals. Five of the directors were Standard Oil employees appointed by the refinery. Six board members chosen at-large were required to be citizens of Whiting. The first Board of Managers were as follows: J. E. Evans, T. S. Boyle, J. D. Melvin, H. F. Glair, and Dan Gallagher from Standard Oil, and Mrs. William Rought, Mrs. James Hudson, John M. Thiele, Walter Schrage, Joe Chilla and Roy E. Green from Whiting.

The dedication of the Community Center was held under the leadership of Whiting's American Legion Post 80. The event was held in the fall of 1923. J. L. Dickinson, Jr., Chairman of the National Rehabilitation Committee of the American Legion, and Frank Henley, State Adjunct of the Indiana Department of the American Legion, were the principle speakers. In addition, Col. Robert W. Stewart, Chairman of the Board of Directors and Executive Head of the Standard Oil Company, and Dr. William M. Burton, President, gave brief talks on behalf of the refinery. Other speakers on hand were: E. T. Lies, special representative of Community Service Headquarters, New York, A. J. Parkin, Director of Community Services at Whiting, and J. E. Evans, Assistant Superintendent of the Whiting Works and Chairman of the Board of Managers in charge of the Community House.

The Standard Oil Band, under the direction of Morgan L. Eastman, put on a free concert as part of the dedication proceedings. The concert was held in the auditorium of the Center. Following

the day's speeches, a community dance was held free of charge. In the evening, athletic exhibitions were conducted. There was a bowling match between Fred Lau and Charles Henrikson of Whiting, and Fred Thomas and C. Collins of Chicago. Al Taylor, instructor of billiards at Ann Arbor University, and John J. Duffy of Whiting, displayed their expert billiard and pool playing skills. In addition, parades, airplane stunts, and other forms of entertainment were featured in the morning.

The Memorial Community Center opened its doors to the public on November 12, 1923. During the week of November 9<sup>th</sup> - November 15<sup>th</sup>, a membership campaign was conducted. More than 2,700 individuals registered, which included 1,200 men at \$10 a year, 393 boys 16-21 years of age at \$6 a year, 267 boys 12-16 years of age at \$2 a year, 520 women at \$8 a year, 253 girls 16-21 years of age at \$5 a year, and 261 girls 12-16 years of age at \$2 a year. Any boys or girls under 12 were admitted to the Center for free. In the year 1923, between 500 and 600 people on average were using the building each month.

In the fall of 1929, the Community Center's kitchen was relocated to the main floor. The kitchen had previously been located in the basement. Once the dining room and banquet hall was relocated to the first floor, it only made sense to have the kitchen nearby. Approximately 10 feet was partitioned off in the new banquet hall to serve as a kitchen. The old kitchen downstairs was to be used as a surplus kitchen.

The following year the Whiting Community Center was equipped with a modern and costly cafeteria and coffee shop. Under the management of J. O'Keefe, the new service opened on October 6, 1930. Modern refrigerating equipment was installed consisting of a refrigerator, drinking water cooler, display salad pan and an ice cream fountain. A filtering system, which removed all chlorination and every form of bacilli, leaving pure sparkling drinking water, was also part of the equipment. The equipment added was the same used by restaurants in Chicago's Merchandise Mart

and practically every first class hotel in the “Windy City.”

Over the years, a variety of activities were conducted at the Whiting Community Center. The auditorium featured cooking demonstrations, musical revues, plays, talent shows, concerts, and vaudeville performances. Members participated in a variety of athletic pursuits with everything from volleyball to handball. Even the city’s children were involved in the many opportunities the Center provided. For instance, the boys of Whiting were known for their marble shooting skills, capturing many state crowns in the process.

Today, the Whiting Community Center serves as the heart of the Park and Recreation system. Throughout the year, the Center offers a variety of programs and activities. The Community Center has many indoor amenities available for public use. There are two basketball courts, one running/walking track, two saunas, two whirlpools, a swimming pool, handball / racquetball court, weight and cardiovascular rooms, billiards room, meeting rooms, and kitchen facilities. The Community Center also houses a bowling center, which hosts various bowling leagues. To find out more about the house that Rockefeller built visit the library’s meeting room.