September 24, 2012

Countdown to Riverside City College’s 100th Anniversary

It took 28 years, but Riverside City College President Arthur G. Paul and Architect G. Stanley Wilson’s dream of a fully enclosed Quadrangle came to pass in January of 1951. Below is a conceptual drawing that appeared in the October 11, 1949 “Tiger Times” student newspaper. Three elements shown in the drawing did not make it to the completed structure. The first was a raised stage for the presentation of plays and programs. The second was a slanted roof over the stage (a patio ended up in this area). The third concept not to make the final construction was the Speaker’s Pulpit that was to have extended over stage right.

The photos below were taken during the construction phase.
But how did the tiered area leading to the lower level acquire the vaguely insulting name, “The Pit”? It’s highly doubtful that President A.G. Paul or Architect G. Stanley Wilson were responsible for the name. A 1975 article in “Viewpoints” attempted to clear up this mystery. According to the story, it was Robert Patton (Professor of English, 1931-61) that gave the “Pit” its moniker. As the account goes, Patton took a look at the area in December of 1950 and remarked, “It looks just like a snake pit”. The dictionary definition of a “snake pit” is: 1. a pit where snakes are kept 2. a place of horror and confusion, as a crowded mental hospital where patients are improperly cared for. Patton probably had the 1948 American film “The Snake Pit” in mind when he said this. The movie featured Olivia DeHaviland playing the part of “Virginia Cunningham”, a woman who found herself in an insane asylum but couldn’t remember how she got there. Throughout the film “Virginia” was threatened with being sent to “the snake pit” if she didn’t change her way of thinking. In the motion picture, “the Snake Pit” was an open room where the most severe cases were permitted to roam about and jabber incoherently. Patton’s “Snake Pit” didn’t stick but somehow “The Pit” became the name of choice. Below is a 1952 “Tequesquite” yearbook photo of Robert Patton and the October 24, 1975 “Viewpoints” article quoting him.

“The Pit” was originally conceived as an outdoor amphitheatre, thus explaining the wide steps that have challenged RCC students, staff and faculty for over 60 years. The steps were intended to be wide enough to hold chairs and leg room for an audience. The photo below appeared in the March 20, 1951 “Tiger Times”. Note that in the photo’s caption, the area is already being called “The Pit”.

A “Pit” by any other name — is still the “Pit”

By BEVERLY ELIS
Staff Writer

In December, 1950, Robert Patton, a former faculty member, stood staring at the almost-completed outdoor theater and said to Art Knopp, Director of Community Services, “It looks just like a snake pit.” The snake pit he refers to was a current popular movie exposing the mistreatment, horror and despair of the inmates experienced in mental institutions.

The plan for this particular construction at RCC was that it be an amphitheater where plays and programs would be presented when weather permitted. The wide steps were intended to accommodate chairs, “but I can’t recall ever seeing chairs on them,” said Knopp.

Students at RCC have kept the name Mr. Patton gave the structure for the original idea for the area was discarded. It is now a meeting place, eating place, running place, study place or a just do nothing place. It’s “The Pit.”
It is 3 years and 24 weeks until RCC’s 100th Anniversary on March 13, 2016.

The Riverside City College Instructional Media Center is bringing you this five year countdown to RCC’s 100th Anniversary. Our intention is to give everyone a weekly glance at the many people and events that have been a part of the college.

Our thanks go to the RCC Digital Library Archives and the District’s Office of Strategic Communications and Relations for allowing us to use their photo and newspaper collections. Thanks as well to all of the RCC students and Faculty Advisors that were a part of the yearbook and newspaper staffs. Thanks also to Tom Johnson and Gilbert Jimenez who wrote “the book” about RCC’s history. “Riverside City College 1916-1981- A 65 Year History” is available in the RCC Digital Library.

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