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St. Paul, MN

Kitchen Memories

...a tour of spaces where food was once made and served at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota—with imagined, projected, and enacted memories, a hybrid of old and new...

Manor Hall, 1922

That's weird, there's a package of candy sitting here. Next to the water fountain. They must be left over from a wedding, or maybe a christening. Actually, they look like *colaciones*, those traditional sweets I just tried in Ecuador. Sort of like sugared almonds, or pralines, but not caramelized. The guy who was ran the shop spent, like, three hours making them—shaking peanuts in this huge pan over a low fire, coating them with sugar syrup. And now here they are in St. Paul, at Hamline... Nice to think about an Ecuadorian fiesta happening so far away from Quito.



A friend of mine used to work here at Manor Hall, and told me that this dining room held a lot of formal events in the past. She redid those window valances, in fact—about ten years ago, when the space was being spruced up a bit. They didn't need to do a lot of renos, though. It's still in great shape.

That same friend told me that her great-aunt met her great-uncle during a fancy dinner that took place in this space. Hamline used to organize these things—dinners and socials and mixers—a 'proper' way for the young women who lived here to have social contact with men. My friend said her great-aunt always thought it was Hamline's way of getting women their MRSs at the same time as their BAs and BSs. Anyway, at the dinner, they apparently found out they both played bridge, and that became the basis for their courtship.



But after they were married, my friend's aunt decided her new husband was a terrible player—he never remembered any of the bidding conventions—and so she refused to partner with him anymore. She found someone else to play with. Saved their marriage, maybe.

Anyway, the kitchen for this dining hall is right underneath us. They cooked all the food down there, and then sent it up in

photo: Hamline University Archives

a dumbwaiter—it came up right here, where those candies were sitting. Now I guess the elevator shaft is where the pipes come up for those water fountains. The serving staff would have brought the food through to the serving kitchen, just through that door. They'd plate it in there, and bring it out to the diners. What service! Must have been a pretty great place to have meal. It really doesn't look like it has changed much... Look at those beams! And the lights. You can sort of hear the echoes of dinner conversations.



Drew Hall, 1946

When they decommissioned the kitchen that used to be here, there were a lot of bits and pieces of equipment that the residents grabbed right away and repurposed. The guys who lived here loved tinkering—well, some of them. And before this space became a woodshop, it was a kind of open studio—lots of counters and shelves and work areas, for whatever the residents wanted to do with it. It was a couple of decades ago.



How many of us did home economics or wood and metal shop in high school? It was pretty streamed by gender, I guess. But that kind of learning was so important—making sure we knew how to cook, or make stuff around the house.



Now, there's this academic concept of "research-creation," or "hands-on learning," "practice-based research." But back when the Drew residents were playing around with the old kitchen tools, they just thought it was a cool way to figure things out mechanically. Invariably, what those students did in this workshop made its way into their studies. That 'hand work' was really important for the 'head work' they did in class, even if it wasn't directly related.

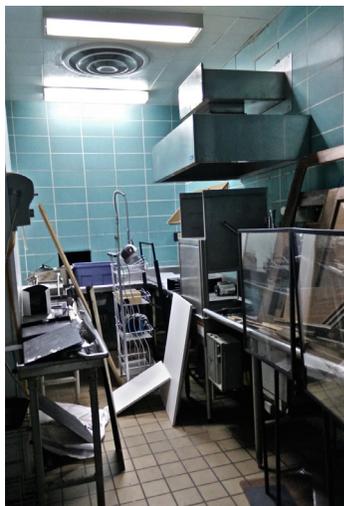
What's intriguing is that the stuff in here—the wordworking tools, the vents, the electrical conduits—it's not SO different from the way this kitchen used to look. Even the smells are kind of similar—you know, the hot smell of metal-on-wood friction, sort of like the smells from cooking... A lot of similarities between putting together a chair or a lamp and putting together a meal. Vegetables, wood... it's all cellulose, after all.



photo: Hamline University Archives



Bush Student Center (the Hub), 1963

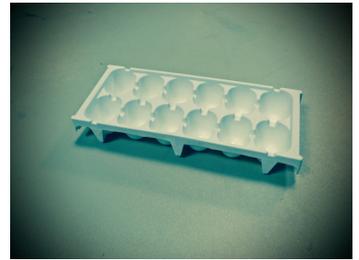


Oh, wow. It was a long time ago when I last came in to this building. I used to work for the snack bar here—“the Hub”—heating up pizza and hotdogs, working the cash, doing late-night clean-up. They started organizing coffee-house nights in the lounge out there—you know, a little bohemian, a little 1960s. Sometimes it got pretty crazy. There was this poetry slam one night—a kind of stand-up, improvisational competition among the local writing talent. It takes some nerve to get up in front of a lot of people and tell your truth. But these kids were doing it. Maybe they had smoked or drunk a little ‘courage’ ahead of time, I don’t know...

Anyway, during one of those coffee house nights, we’d already shut down the serving station, done the clean-up and everything. They didn’t want the smell and the noise from the servery interfering with the poets and singers. So once everyone had cleared out of this space, I snuck a friend in here—not for



anything shocking, mind you, just to kind of show off. Like sneaking someone a backstage pass, except it was backstage at a snack bar. Truth was, I was pretty proud of my job here. I still think all this kitchen equipment is really cool—I mean, look at it. The controls, the typography, the old markings and grime. It's what *we made food with*.



So we were hanging out back here and getting, well, a little friendly, when one of my co-workers came back. Totally cooled the fire, if you know what I mean. My friend took off pretty quickly—embarrassed to be caught backstage, maybe. Or maybe I just seemed like too much of a loser after all, into the kitchen equipment and everything, like I was.



photo: Hamline University Archives

Sorin Hall, 1958

Wow. It feels like yesterday that I was eating here. I graduated from Hamline three years ago, and this place has a lot of memories. I ate all my meals in Sorin for two straight years, you know. I hear they shut it down pretty recently—now it's the central location for the textbook rental system they have put in place. Pretty great idea to keep costs down.

Oh, man! Look at these grease drips. I love that smell. Fries, hash, old oil. Nice.



I grew up on the west coast of Canada, but when I was trying to decide where to go to college, my father put me in touch with a bunch of old colleagues of his, people he'd gone to grad school with in southern California. Well one of them worked for Hamline, in the School of Education, and she invited me to visit and do a tour of the campus. I was so amazed with the insider view (and kind of flattered by the private tour), I totally fell in love with the place. A boy from Vancouver Island, who suddenly shows up in St. Paul to study pedagogy and education technology. That's me...

So yeah, I really got into hanging out in this space. It felt sort of like home—a bit—but also new. A place that was mine. They served this great coffee, some kind of local, quasi-fair trade stuff. Whatever.



I *loved* the salad bar, though. I almost became a vegetarian when I was here, and then I realized that I just liked having someone else prepare vegetables for me. I used to be really lazy—I thought washing and trimming and peeling and chopping a carrot was too much work. But something shifted a little bit here. Somehow I started getting into the idea of paying a lot of attention to the raw materials that went into a meal. It was like I was a garden, and tending to the things I put into me made me a lot more productive...



photo: Hamline University Archives



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