

THE BUILDING AT 915 MILLINGTON

by Roland Mueller

A widely-used guide for doing history suggests that in researching and writing a local history, one could not do much better than to begin with the building that is related to the topic. Learning something about that building, especially its past, can often provide significant information about the values, culture and priorities of those who built it, owned it or used it over the years. Although much more valuable while standing, it can still be very helpful provided there remain for the historian relevant artifacts, documents or photos.

Such is the case for the building that once occupied the property that is now a parking lot on the southeast side of the 900 block of Millington Street (aka, Church Street). This structure, originally built for the local YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), was later used by a group of businessmen now known as the Chamber of Commerce.

THE OCCUPANT: YMCA

The YMCA unit which once occupied the building was part of a world-wide movement that today serves millions of people in 125 nations. It grew rapidly after it was organized in London by George Williams in 1844. Initially its chief purpose was to put Christian principles into practice by helping young men develop a healthy body, mind and spirit. This was to be achieved by providing athletic facilities, by holding classes that taught a variety of practical skills, by promoting the Christian faith and by fostering humanitarian causes. Although many local and national units presently de-emphasize some of these original objectives and programs, YMCA remains a movement that fosters religious ideals and values.

The first American YMCA was organized in Boston by Thomas Sullivan on December 29, 1851. That there was a genuine need for this type of institution helps explain its rapid expansion across the nation in cities both large and small. One of these was located in downtown Winfield shortly after the turn of the century. For several decades it provided physical, educational and social activities for local young men, including students at the local high school and Southwestern College. For the college, its gymnasium served as a popular site for some of its physical education classes. But more than that, male students were encouraged also to make use of its other facilities. A full page feature in the 1905 Moundbuilder yearbook noted that "The YMCA attempts to cooperate with the college to help the student build up his body and keep it clean. . .and learn how to meet and get along with his fellows." Then it added, "The student who does not identify himself with such a movement fails to make the best use of his opportunities" because it is "among the institutions that make the life of a student more pleasant and profitable."