

History: PHYSICS DEPARTMENT MOVES TO WENIGER HALL

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Prof. Shirley Dow Stekel, who graduated from our department in 1961 has sent us the following eye-witness history of the move to Weniger hall. You can find more about Prof. Stekel at [our blog post about her recent visit](#).

THE OSC PHYSICS DEPARTMENT MOVES TO WENIGER HALL

Shirley Dow Stekel

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When I arrived on the Oregon State College campus as a freshman in September 1954, the Physics Department was housed in a building attached to the old (1913) Mines Building (now 'Batcheller Hall'). This addition, constructed in 1928 for the growing Physics Department, was referred to as the 'Physics Building'. After the Physics Department moved to its current location, this building was named 'Covell Hall'. My recollection of the Physics Building is that it seemed very old fashioned with an abundance of very dark woodwork. My brother¹ has a similar recollection of this building.



In 1954, the Physics Department office was on the main floor with two lecture rooms at the end of the hall; a larger one and a smaller one. A few professors had offices on this floor, but office space was scarce and those who taught specialty labs had a desk in their lab instead of a proper office. The specialty labs were on the second floor. Some non-physics offices, such as the School of Science Office and the KOAC radio station studio and record library were on the third floor. By this time, the KOAC transmitter had been moved to an off campus site. The basement was also well used. The General Physics lab and Modern Physics lab were there and I think there was a small shop. One otherwise unused lab room with large wooden tables and wooden chairs served as a "home room" for all of the graduate students. (When I was a first year graduate student, I found the library a much quieter and more pleasant place to study.) At this time, there was no calculus-based Engineering Physics course so the first year 'General Physics' course was large. With only one room for the many lab sections, Saturday morning lab sessions were needed to accommodate all of the students. (Space was short all over campus and many multi-section, 3-credit courses had Tue-Thur-Sat AM sections. I remember having General Physics labs and Calculus classes on Saturday mornings.)

An essay in the Physics Department section of the OSU archives contains the following description: "During the last decade of occupancy of the Physics Building, the department was in serious need for space. Office space was so short that two full professors occupied a 10 foot by 10 foot room and many of the faculty had their offices in teaching laboratories. There was not even a laboratory for staff research and only four for graduate student research. Furthermore, there were no recitation rooms in the Physics Department, although the three lecture rooms served as recitation rooms at times."²

A new building for the Physics Department was a wonderful idea! We watched the new building slowly rise via 'lift-slab' construction. First the support pillars were installed, then concrete was poured to form a floor and then that

floor was slowly raised by electric motors placed atop each pillar. And then the process was repeated. Something malfunctioned when one of the floors had been lifted about two feet and the floor broke into two parts. This floor was repaired and was successfully lifted on the second attempt. In March of 1959, the Physics Department began to move into the new 'Physics – Chemistry' building although painters were still working inside. Graduate students were expected to stay on campus during Spring Break to help with the moving. I was a first year graduate student at this time. Much of the small equipment was loaded onto lab carts and pushed up to the new building. The large freight elevator in the new building was much appreciated when a load needed to be taken to one of the upper floors.

The new building was a delight with lots of windows, good lighting, bright new labs with storage closets, many comfortable offices and a library/meeting room. Each professor had his own office and other offices were shared by two graduate students. My own desk and a blackboard on the wall provided a fine place to study and grade papers. It was a great morale booster to have office space.

In 1961, the second half of the building was completed to form the building now called 'Weniger Hall'. Other departments shared the space in the new building. These included the School of Science, Science Education, General Science and Agricultural Chemistry. "Built at a cost of five million dollars, this unit gives Oregon State University one of the largest and best equipped science teaching and research centers in the United States." "Part of the construction and equipment cost was paid by generous grants from the U.S. Public Health Service and by the National Science foundation."³

The dedication for the Physics – Chemistry Building was held on October 26 and 27, 1962. The distinguished guests included two representatives from the Oregon State System of Higher Education and the previous Dean of the Oregon State University School of Science. The three invited speakers for this event were well known scientists: Dr. Edwin M. McMillan, Director of the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory and Nobel Prize winner; Dr. Willard F. Libby, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and Nobel Prize winner; and Dr. Homer Newell Director of Space Sciences for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.³

'Weniger Hall' became the official name of the Physics – Chemistry Building in 1966. This name change honored Dr. Willibald Weniger who spent most of his career at Oregon State College. Dr. Weniger was born in Milwaukee, WI and received his PhD in 1908 from the University of Wisconsin. "The Department of Physics at Oregon Agricultural College was started in 1908 with the appointment of Dr. Willibald Weniger as Assistant Professor of Physics by President William Jasper Kerr. Dr. Weniger was at that time, the only PhD on the staff of the College."⁴ After an absence during World War I, he returned to Oregon State College in 1920 as head of the Physics department. Dr. Weniger was Dean of the Graduate Division at the time he reached mandatory retirement age in 1949.⁵ After retiring from Oregon State College, he spent four years at the University of Alaska. He passed away in Corvallis on March 14, 1959.⁵

1. Wayne Dow: BS engineering 1963; MBA 1970
2. *The Second New Physics Building*. An essay written by a Physics faculty member in 1966. In the 'History of the Physics Department' section of the OSU digital archives.
3. *Dedication of Physics – Chemistry Building*. An essay written by a Physics faculty member. (Probably Dr. James J. Brady) In the 'History of the Physics Department' section of the OSU digital archives.
4. *Introduction to the 'History of the Physics Department'*. OSU digital archives.
5. *Biographical Note, 'Willibald Weniger Papers'*. OSU digital archives.