

## Hotel Sacred Heart, Renville County



**THE MILWAUKEE ROAD** platted the western Minnesota town of Sacred Heart in 1879 while building a railway through farmlands to South Dakota. By the 1910s, Sacred Heart had grown into a small but thriving rural trading center with several grain elevators, livestock dealers, banks, and churches, as well as a high school, a fire department, concrete sidewalks, and electric streetlights. However, a fire destroyed the town's only hotel on Valentine's Day, 1907.

In 1914, local entrepreneurs pooled resources to build a replacement: the 25-room Hotel Sacred Heart. It quickly became a favorite stop for business travelers arriving by train. Salesmen displayed wares in its sample room and traveling medical professionals treated patients there. The hotel also attracted early automobile tourists along the new Yellowstone Trail, a transcontinental highway created by a business association to encourage car travel to Yellowstone National Park. The trail (now Highway 212) passed right by the hotel's front door.

By 1921, the Willmar newspaper had dubbed the hotel "the Radisson of Renville County." The center of the town's social life, the Hotel Sacred Heart hosted every major community event in its highly rated dining room, from wedding celebrations and club meetings to the annual high school banquet where the juniors feted graduating seniors.

Notable guests at Hotel Sacred Heart included the Harlem Globetrotters, the barnstorming African American basketball team from Chi-



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cago. In 1930, a full house at the high school gym watched the Globetrotters trounce Sacred Heart's town team, the Whippets. The Globetrotters faced constant racism while traveling but apparently felt welcomed by the town and the hotel. According to the local newspaper, the Globetrotters used Sacred Heart as their base in 1931 when playing nearby teams. Older town residents recall that Whippet Harry Strand once played with the Globetrotters when one of their team members was injured.

The hotel changed hands in 1947 and continued as the Romberg Hotel until 1978, when it was converted to

apartments. The Sacred Heart Area Historical Society now owns the building, which was listed on the National Register in 2016. With the support of a Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant, the society restored the front facade and porch in 2019. Another Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant, received in 2020, financed preparation of construction documents to continue renovating the hotel's exterior and interior.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

This feature was made possible by the Henry and Donna Morgan Fund for Research and Publications.



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