

Worthington Armory and Community Building, Nobles County



FOLLOWING WORLD WAR I, the Minnesota National Guard expanded dramatically and launched a statewide program to build two dozen armories designed to serve as community centers as well as bases for local units. Worthington, an ambitious agricultural center in southwestern Minnesota, successfully competed to win a new armory and community building that opened in 1923.

The large brick structure contained a two-story head house for administrative offices linked by a low passageway to a drill hall with a gymnasium, balcony, bleachers, and public restrooms for “farmer ladies and men.” The basement contained a mess hall, shooting range, and equipment storage rooms. The first community event held in the new building was a New Year’s Eve celebration featuring a dance in the drill hall and card playing in the head house.

For decades, Worthington’s armory played a vital community role. Concerts, dances, memorial services, classes, lectures, and exhibitions all took place in their drill hall, along with basketball, boxing, and wrestling tournaments. During annual King Turkey Day festivals, residents lined up for free pancake breakfasts in the garage addition and later danced in the drill hall. The building was also the site of history in the making at events such as town send-offs for World War II draftees, polio vaccinations for schoolchildren, and physical examinations for Vietnam War draftees.

When Minnesota’s guard downsized in 1992, the armory was decommissioned and the city bought



A 1930s view of the armory from the tower of the former courthouse (COURTESY NOBLES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY)

and leased it as commercial space for gymnastic teams and other groups. In 2015, Nobles County purchased the building and in 2017 it was awarded National Register of Historic Places designation. In 2019, the county offered the Nobles County Historical Society a five-year lease to use the structure as a museum if it could raise funding for a major renovation. Combining prodigious local donations with several Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage grants, the historical society raised \$3.5 million to replace the HVAC system; install an elevator; restore the drill hall floor, balcony, and arched windows; and expose its gabled ceiling. In November 2022, the historical society held a gala centennial celebration and grand opening for the Nobles County History Center.

After 100 years, the former armory remains a vibrant community resource, with reconfigured



Recent renovations flood the drill hall with natural light and expose its impressive ceiling. (BETH RICKERS/NCHS)

exhibit and event space, a library, offices, meeting rooms, and climate-controlled artifact storage. Once again, the building regularly houses exhibits, meetings, parties, and major programs, such as a living history presentation on Civil War veterans who founded the fraternal Grand Army of the Republic and its official auxiliary, the Woman’s Relief Corps.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

Source Note

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. Worthington Armory and Community Building, Nobles County, November 27, 2017. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/100001844#82003034>.

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