
INTRODUCTION

by C. L. Sonnichsen

The Texas State College of Mines and Metallurgy, when I first saw it on the morning of June 3, 1931, was part of the University of Texas family, but to me it looked like the poorest of poor relations. Four odd-looking buildings out in the rocky landscape, a mile and a half north of downtown El Paso, were grouped casually around a tall, discouraged-looking hill as if someone had tossed them there. A power house and a small stuccoed residence were in the area (it could hardly be called a campus). That was all. No paving. No landscaping. No people. It was Sunday and the place was deserted, as quiet as a graveyard. I had a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach as I looked around. I was a tenderfoot from the East and did not yet realize that Southwestern deserts are magnificent.

I could not know then, and did not know for a long time, how much it had cost the civic leaders of El Paso, the local representatives in the state legislature, and the top men of the college to place those four gaunt buildings out there among the rocks.

I had some private worries which made the prospect seem even more bleak. I was two days late for classes, having taken my doctor's oral the day my prospective students were registering two thousand miles away. There had been no time to prepare for my classes, and one of my two advanced English courses was not familiar to me. Three days on the train had given me time to get up my lectures for the first day, but not for the second. Would I make it through the summer?

W. W. Lake of the Chemistry Department, director of the summer session, had met me at the train station and found me a place to live on the campus. Burges Hall, the easternmost building, was a combination dormitory, dining hall, and locker room for the football team. The male mining students slept, ate, and played poker there. The students called it Keno Hall. There was a good deal of folklore about the place, but it was quiet during the summer.

This all-purpose building was presided over by Professor Anton H. Berkman, an amply proportioned Texan who had been an army sergeant during the First World War, where he had developed an instinct for Taking Charge. He managed most college functions with great energy and efficiency—everything from faculty picnics to faculty and student seating at commencement exercises. He always looked, and was, worried and determined, but he got things done. We became friends at once and fell into a regular routine. We got up at five, got dressed, and went down to the Ramona Hotel for breakfast. The place did not have a very good reputation but it served family-style meals; it took a good deal of food to fuel Berkman for the day's activities. We were back on campus by seven, spent the morning in classroom and office, and labored the rest of the day and a good part of the night getting ready for tomorrow. My students were bright and industrious, many of them teachers, and our relations were good. They complained a bit about the length of my assignments, a pattern which persisted in my professional life for the next forty years. I never thought an education should come easy.

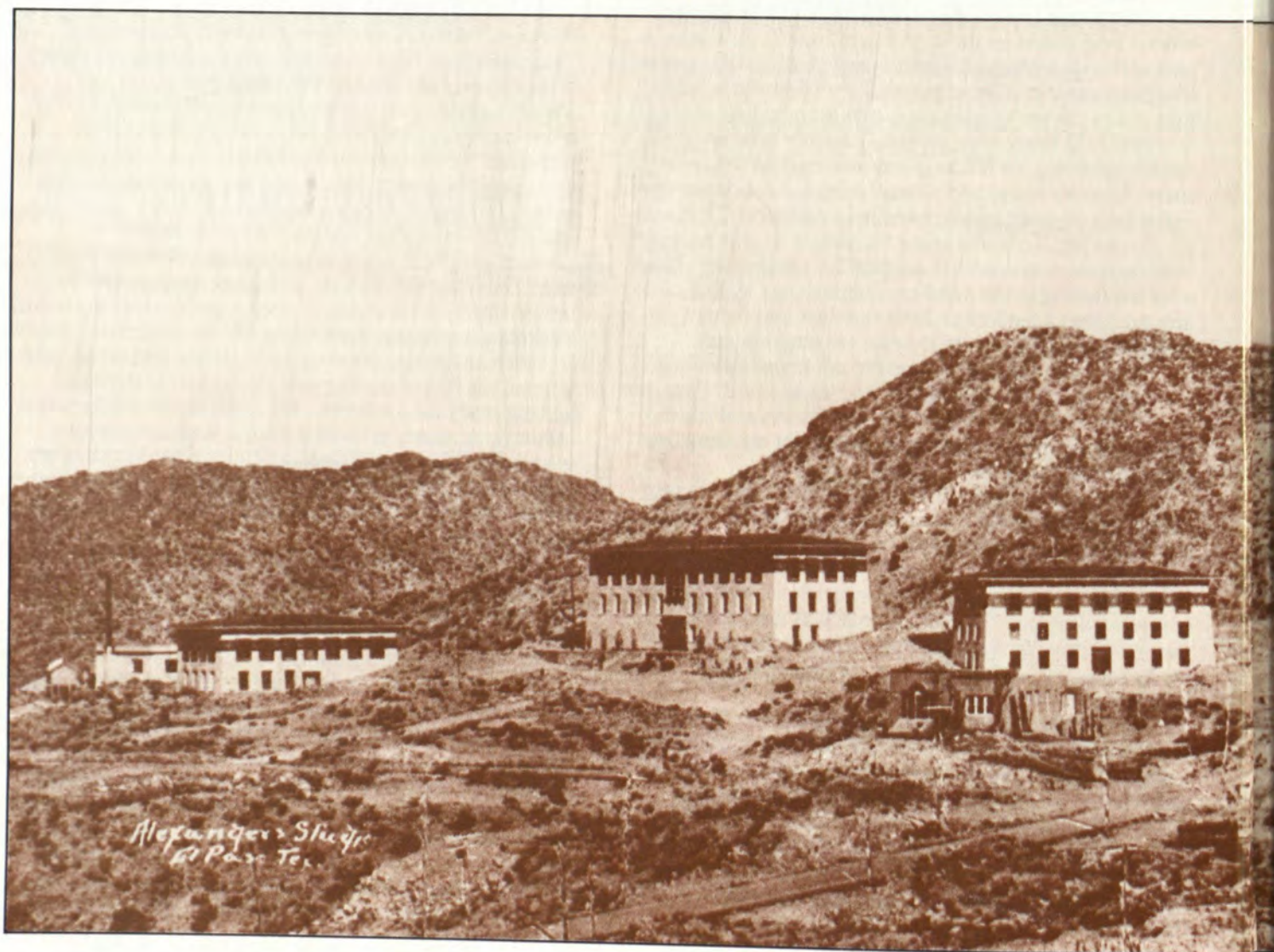
We were in a transitional period that summer of 1931. The college was to become a four-year liberal arts institution with its own president. The Bachelor of Arts degree was to be added to the Bachelor of Science in Mining. Two deans, already on the grounds, would continue to administer their divisions, but the president would no longer be the president of the far-off University of Texas at Austin. Dean John W. Kidd, a short, round man with a raspy voice and a sardonic eye, was in charge of engineering and mathematics. He was also in charge of buildings and grounds, a position which enabled him to indulge in his greatest pleasure—blasting. In the early thirties he dynamited tons of rock to make new rooms on the lower level of the Main Building, and it pleased him to set a jack hammer going directly under the desk of an English

professor lecturing in a classroom just above.

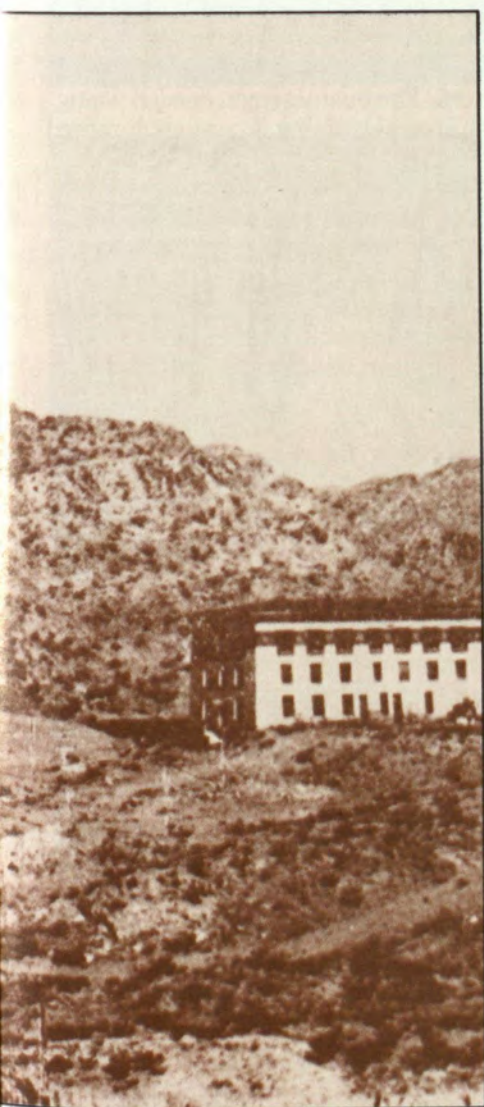
The new dean of liberal arts, who had been the top man in the school for some years, was a former high school principal, a former captain of infantry in the United States Army, who had come over from the El Paso Junior College which folded its tents in 1927. Teacher training and liberal arts courses were transferred to the College of Mines, and a number of teachers came with them. They formed something like the backbone of the liberal arts faculty in 1931.

Dean C. A. Puckett was a man who went by the book. He thought rules were there to be enforced and he enforced them. The philosophy that deans are appointed to take care of special cases—to break the rules—was alien to him, but he was usually an agreeable fellow who

enjoyed a chuckle and sometimes a bit of barbershop harmony. In times of stress—such as registration—his temperature was likely to go up. The two divisions usually got along well enough, but there was actually a great gulf between them. Dean Kidd thought engineers were supposed to be tough and the students endeavored to live up to his vision. They wore boots and used vigorous language (Dean Kidd called it “speaking French”) and they chewed tobacco (he called it “angel food”) whether they liked it or not. Kidd and his men called the liberal arts students “Peedoggies” (pedagogues-non-engineers). The fires remained banked, however, until 1949 when the College of Mines and Metallurgy became Texas Western College. This was more than the engineers could bear with patience, and they painted a broad green stripe



Dr. C. L. Sonnichsen was named professor emeritus of English upon his retirement in 1972. He had served as dean of liberal arts and as H. Y. Benedict Professor. After retiring from teaching, he moved to Tucson where he edited a historical journal and continued to write books.



The early campus, in about 1921, was a cluster of buildings that resembled monasteries in the Himalayas rather than an American mining school. From left are the mill, the Power House which became part of the present Geology Building, Chemistry Building which is now named Quinn Hall, Main which is now Old Main, Kelly Hall which was renamed Vowell Hall, and Burges Hall, now called Graham Hall. Two newer dormitory buildings now carry the names of Kelly and Burges. In front of Kelly here is the home built in 1921 by Dean and Mrs. S. H. Worrell, which later became the home of John W. "Cap" Kidd. Photo by Alexander Studios.

across the road at the south end of the Geology Building, the entrance to the engineering complex, with TCM on one side and TWC on the other. The implication was: Peedoggies, don't cross this line! President Wilson H. Elkins had to call the engineers in and advise them to shape up.

The new head of the school, scheduled to take office in the fall of 1931, was a big, handsome, Boston-born Irishman named John G. Barry. Superficially he was a genial fellow, usually smiling and fond of a joke, but he had a granite core and could be stubborn. At times he seemed to be treating his faculty with the manners of a shift boss, but at the same time he preserved the appearance of democratic process by calling frequent—too frequent—faculty meetings. We all were aware, however, that he had exceptionally heavy burdens to bear and we forgave him.

In the first place, facilities were inadequate but enrollment was soaring. People downtown wanted an athletic program, while Barry wanted a respectable college. And money, as usual, was short. The Depression was with us and the state's revenues were in such shape that we were paid in scrip which was discounted at ten percent by the banks and by such benevolent institutions as the Popular Dry Goods Company. Supporters and friends of the College collected \$25,000 that summer to make sure the school survived and the teachers got paid. Technically this life preserver was illegal since it did not come to us through the main university, but nothing was said until Isabella Zimmerman came back to the campus with her doctoral work completed but without the formally awarded degree. Barry told her not to report until the degree was conferred, but her lawyer persuaded Barry that he would have a suit on his hands about that \$25,000 if he persisted in his error. So Isabella came back to the campus, but no classes were assigned to her until she was really and legally Dr. Zimmerman.

Worst of all, some of the Movers and Shakers in Austin were always pointing out that the state could save a considerable amount of money by moving the mining school to Austin and abandoning the El Paso plant. There were times when we could not be sure of employment beyond the current year. It was rather a scary situation for everybody.

This was the tiny acorn from which our present oak tree grew. The difficulties were almost comical. As students came in increasing numbers, there was never enough of anything. When the new buildings were occupied, there was a shortage of chairs. Any expense had to be cleared through Austin and there was no time to waste. Puckett telegraphed: "No chairs—no school." Mary Kelly taught from a sofa. By juggling and conniving and cajol-

ing, Puckett kept the wheels turning.

For the liberal arts students an enormous obstacle to working on the college level was the lack of a library. In 1931 the books were kept in a medium-sized room in the Main Building. There were some technical books and periodicals, but almost nothing for the liberal arts people.

On another level, there were no facilities for faculty or student get-togethers. A student union with a faculty lounge was years in the future. The only gathering place was the "co-op" on the eastern end of the Main Building next to the men's rest room. Operated in 1931 by Speedy Nelson with the assistance of his wife Fay and her brother A. O. Wynn, it dispensed sandwiches, textbooks, mail, and limited social contacts to students and faculty alike. Without it, Mines would have been a much poorer place—but more, much more, was needed.

And yet there was much to be said for this struggling country college. For one thing, it was desperately needed. El Paso was not yet a city, but it was growing fast. The schools needed teachers. The businessmen needed young men and women with special training. It was six hundred miles to Austin—too far for many people to go for an education. No school was ever prayed for and worked for with greater dedication. The mining school, it should be added, filled a special need. Mining in Mexico was going full blast and a great many Mexican boys were trained at TCM. It was said that at one time a fourth of the mining engineers in Mexico were our products. Mining men trusted Cap Kidd to send them competent people and he did not let them down.

And there was constant progress. The library, for example, was moved to the top floor of Kelly Hall and a stairway and landing were erected at the back of the building to give it a separate entrance. It was not much, but it served until we got the big new library building which was superseded by the palatial structure opened in 1984, looking like a Hapsburg castle on its hilltop in Europe. How could we have foreseen that?

I was not much concerned with the future of the Texas College of Mines that summer of 1931. In my innocence I thought that my stay would be brief and that the Harvard Employment Office would have a job for me in the fall—a job in a well-established school with trees and lawns and old brick buildings overgrown with ivy. By the end of the first summer term, however, I had come to realize that jobs were scarce and getting scarcer—that I was out of sight and probably out of mind. El Paso and West Texas were looking better to me, though I was not yet prepared to admit that the Chihuahuan desert was clean and beautiful. The college would be moving onward and upward in the fall with the new liberal arts program and it was said that the new president would be bringing



One of the most influential faculty members was one of the first: John W. "Cap" Kidd. He started as professor of engineering when the school opened in 1914, was the college's acting head in 1922-23, then was dean from October 1923 to August 1927. In the lean season of 1915 he gave \$800 of his own money to equip an early football team and helped with coaching. He later pushed the building of the first football field which was named in his honor. His skill with explosives was legendary but it was said that "he never cracked the foundation nor broke a single window pane." He was still on the faculty when he died on December 29, 1941.



Dr. W. W. Lake, professor of chemistry, was among faculty members who came to the College of Mines from the El Paso Junior College when the two schools merged in 1927. He retired in 1945 and was named professor emeritus in 1961. Dr. Lake met C. L. Sonnichsen at the train depot when he arrived in El Paso and found him a place to live.

in a few Ph.D.'s to head departments and teach advanced courses. It might be well for me to stay—at least for a while. I would consider it if President Barry asked me.

The second term of summer started and Barry had not asked me. It dawned on me that I was not going to be asked. Mohammed would have to go to the mountain.

The mountain was the Mills Building downtown where President-to-be John Barry had his office. I walked over to Mesa Avenue and caught the streetcar. Mr. Barry was in, but to see him I had to get past Alice Barry, his wife and secretary, a dignified woman with a patrician profile, eyeglasses, and a professional smile. I was a little intimidated but found that I didn't need to be. Alice was interested to hear that I had just come from Boston, which was her old home, and the foundation for a life-long friendship was laid. I don't remember that I saw Barry that morning, but I didn't need to. I had the job.

At the first faculty meeting in the fall I found that I was one of six doctors—the first ones on the campus. Rabbi Joseph Roth, a dynamic little Hungarian, was there to teach philosophy and psychology. Edwin J. Knapp of Wisconsin, stout and serious, was to head mathematics and physics. John L. Waller, a lean and lanky Oklahoman, who could have wandered over the hills of Kentucky with coonskin cap and a long rifle, was to take charge of history. Edward Elias, elderly and unwell, made a stab at guiding modern languages but gave up in 1933 and was succeeded by Frederick W. Bachmann—Freddie—a somewhat sardonic bachelor who came down from Wisconsin. Howard Quinn of Minnesota, just back from Harvard with his doctor's degree, managed geology. I was the only one of the six not provided with a department.

Up to this time a master's degree was a valid passport to a teaching position at Mines, but the handwriting was plainly visible on the adobe wall. Not much later Anton Berkman, head of biological sciences, and W. W. Lake, in line for headship of chemistry, went off to the University of Chicago and returned, clutching their diplomas.

Head of English, speech, and drama was Emmett Addis Drake, a courtly, somewhat stately gentleman, close to retirement, with an interesting background. He was descended from Sir Francis Drake's brother (he always explained carefully that Sir Francis was a bachelor and he could not claim descent from him) but his roots were in Wisconsin where he had attended the university. He had helped build the Northern Pacific Railroad across the northern plains and Rockies and then taught school in a Mexican community in California, where he had learned Spanish. We became friends at once and cooperated very well until he retired in 1933. He had been struck twice by cars on the streets of El Paso and he felt

safer in the Victorian brick mansion in New Ulm, Minnesota, which his wife owned. I succeeded him as department head and retained the post for twenty-seven years. I had Gone West as Horace Greely advised, and grown up with the country.

I remember many of my new colleagues, now my old colleagues, with great affection. There was Mary Kelly Quinn, wife of Howard and daughter of a pioneer El Paso mayor, sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued, but a humane and dedicated person. There was Myrtle Ball in speech and drama, enthusiastic and full of a sort of homespun sincerity. There was Mrs. Abbie Durkee, director of the men's glee club. She was a large lady who conducted with great enthusiasm, but she chose music of such refinement that one of her boys declared that she had forgotten he was a healthy male with full equipment. In my own corner of the field were gentle, friendly L. D. Moses, out of Kentucky by way of Columbia University, Miss Norma Egg, from East Texas and Austin, a lively lady, and Orville Willett, another Kentuckian—one of a number who felt threatened by the influx of Ph.D.'s. He joined a delegation which called on President-Elect Barry and protested our presence. The present staff, they said, was adequate to handle the situation. Fortunately, Barry did not see things their way. They were all memorable characters in one way or another, and I was proud to be one of them.

People are able to like each other better in this sort of environment. We had been brought together in a small, struggling college where departmental and personal rivalries had not yet become a part of the picture. We formed enduring friendships, and it would not be too much to say that we loved each other. Mrs. F. H. Seamon, wife of the head of chemistry, was Virginia-born and socially adept. She served, without ostentation, as a sort of *arbiter elegantiarum* for the faculty, entertaining frequently at her yellow brick house on Upson Avenue. In pleasant weather we had faculty picnics in the sandhills near the river—a custom which I found disturbing at first. What! No trees? No grass to sit on? The shock did not last long, however, and it was pleasant to meet the faculty families. It was pleasant also to watch Dr. B. F. Jenness, the school physician, a dour New Englander with a Navy background, unbend a little as he carved the ham.

We had our differences of opinion, of course, and our crosses to bear. One of the latter was the lack of research facilities. A few of us talked about it, and the discussions came to the attention of President Dossie M. Wiggins, who succeeded John Barry. Wiggins, who had been a dean at Hardin-Simmons University, was a practical man whose family ran an automobile dealership in a Texas



The university campus is the only setting in the Western Hemisphere where buildings in the Bhutanese architectural style may be found. They were inspired by photos such as this one from the April 1914 issue of National Geographic. The style has been followed from the earliest buildings of 1917 to the most recent, the Physical Plant complex, opened in 1988. Courtesy National Geographic.

Panhandle community. He called a meeting to express his views on the research business.

"You are here to teach," he told us. "You have been hired because you are good teachers. When I hire faculty, I pick the best teachers I can get. I do my hiring the way I would buy mules. I get as much mule as I can for my money."

A few days later, Fred Bachmann asked a few of his friends to come to his apartment for dinner and the unveiling of a faculty group picture. The picture was on his wall, suitably veiled. After dinner he pulled the cord and revealed a panoramic representation of a borax twenty-mule team. From then on Freddie called the faculty "Dossie's mules."

The situation, bad as it was, was not, however, hopeless. A reasonable percentage of us knew in our souls that we were here to acquire, record, and disseminate knowledge—not just meet classes and give examinations. True, we were lacking in laboratories and libraries and encouragement, but we still had something to work with. We had our region and our situation on the Mexican border and we went about laying foundations for the years to come. Anton Berkman botanized as far as the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico. Lloyd Nelson wrote the definitive study of the geology of the Franklin Mountains. Bill Strain dug up fossil elephants and contributed to the prehistory of the region. Edgar Ruff put his students to work writing master's theses on Mexican novelists. Vera Wise took her students to Mexico every summer to study Mexican art. Bill Timmons got into the archival resources of northern Mexico and brought treasures to the Mines library. None of us had a sense of mission. We were just doing the work that came to hand. I myself, a specialist in eighteenth-century English literature, began to work with Texas fiction and folklore—because they were there.

It is hard for us who survive from those early days of seed planting and foundation laying to believe our eyes when we read the catalog and note the explosion of activity in cultural and cross-cultural studies, border problems, and international relations. We have the Border

Studies Program, the Cross-Cultural Southwest Ethnic Study Center, the interchanges with Mexican universities, the special programs for teachers from Mexico, the program in English as a second language, the beginning courses taught in Spanish, the emphasis on Chicano studies. We have scholars who are investigating borderlands and Mexican history, sociology, economics, folklore, philosophy, music, and a growing number of faculty members who are proficient in Spanish.

These are the achievements we are proudest of, and rightly so. Beyond our regular work as an American university, our business is with Mexico. It is no accident that we enroll more Mexican nationals than any other school in the United States. An important part of our obligation is to introduce these young people to the history and culture of our country and to introduce our Anglo students to the history and culture of Mexico. Drastic increases in tuition have reduced the number of Mexican students crossing the international bridges every morning, but their day will come again.

An El Paso legislator was the first to see the possibilities of the little college among the rocks. His name was Adrian Pool and for years he raised great clouds of dust in the lower house of the Texas Legislature. He was something of a thorn in the side of President H. Y. Benedict of the main university, who was also our chief administrator. He reported to Dean Puckett on November 22, 1928. "I have not seen Adrian Pool," Benedict said, "but I have heard rumors to the effect that he is attacking the governor for something like a million-dollar deficiency with which to transform the College of Mines into a great international university."

Adrian Pool's dream, which seemed so ridiculous to the president of the University of Texas in 1928 (as reported by Francis Fugate in his 1964 anniversary history of the college) was prophetic. The University of Texas at El Paso, seventy-five years after its birth, has grown from a small regional college to an important meeting place of cultures. It is in fact, if not in name, Texas International.



Main Building, considered a fine example of the Bhutanese architectural style, was the first completed on the new campus. The first floor had only two windows at the front in the building's early years. The streets were rough and unpaved.

