

A Journal Entry

by Helen D. Gunderson

Recorded late in the afternoon on March 14, 2006, at the site of the recently demolished three-story school building that was built in 1917 at Rolfe, Iowa. The journal entry was first published on March 16, 2006, on the Rolfe alumni web site at www.rolfealumni.com. Helen is a 1963 graduate of Rolfe High School and is the Rolfe alumni web site editor.

It is a chilly, breezy day with bright sun and a few wisps of clouds. The space where the old, three-story part of the school stood is now simply air. Seeing the site at this stage has a much heavier and more mystical impact on me than observing the demolition several weeks ago when the building was knocked down.

I feel a vast cavern inside me. The old building is not here at all—not even the foundation. There is an excavated hole in the ground to the north and northeast. I suspect those were the only areas where there were basement-level rooms. Much of the sub-ground area has been filled with dirt, but there still is the cavern. Along the edges are a few large, broken slabs of concrete from a parking lot or sidewalk.

In the space where the building stood, there is nothing except a truncated umbilical cord of a hallway that used to connect the west section to the east wing. There are two gray, steel fire doors blocking the hallway. The walls on both sides of the doors are broken, revealing jagged concrete blocks underneath the brick siding. The window in the red, side door is shattered with a large, gaping hole. The glass looks like crystal-clear shards of ice.

The scene has a deep impact on me but is hard to describe. The orange security fence draped around the perimeter of the building site is worthless and looks like a giant, long ribbon that is distorted as though it is a discarded candy wrapper.

There is no activity here—just a chilly breeze with dogs barking and chain saws roaring in the distance to the west. There is also a dog barking in the lot south of the school. The wooden, red benches in front of the school have been left in tact, albeit they are scruffy. There is no monument to the school.

This is when I begin to equate what I am currently experiencing with what I have felt when facing the finality and mystery of death? Where is the dead person now? Where is Mother? Where is Grandpa? They existed at one time. They had souls. They were alive, and now—they simply are not here.

In much the same way, the old part of the school building simply is not here, and I wonder where it went—in a metaphysical sense. Of course there are pragmatic tasks ahead. The job of clearing the site is not completely finished. The rest of the cavern needs to be filled. Decisions need to be made about the east wing of the building.

This scene is a reminder of places in California where nature has sucked an entire neighborhood or town into a hole. However, it is not as though Rolfe's three-story school building has disappeared into the ground. No, the building has been knocked down, and the demolition crew worked hundreds of hours, sorting the brick from the other rubble and hauling it all away. But the large hole remains in the ground.

The only way that the old part of the building will continue to exist is in photographs and memories of it. For many of us those memories are indelibly imbedded in our minds and psyches—for better or worse.

The space where there once was a three-story building is empty, but in that open area, there were relationships and activities, too numerous to fathom, from 1917 until a year ago. There is also much history and memory connected to the site. However, it is now simply open space and not at all aesthetically pleasing. What will remain as a physical monument to the school? Nothing?

Whew!

As I sit in my car, preparing to drive away, the mantra repeats itself in my mind, "There is nothing there. The building is gone."