

The Purdy Retirement Community

The Purdy Retirement Community, located in the heart of downtown Marshfield, is a new business with a short history. Its location and its name, however, have been familiar to Marshfield residents for over 75 years.

The Purdy stands as a recognizable Marshfield landmark, proudly taking its place between Tower Hall and Upham Mansion. The only building of this style in Marshfield, this Collegiate Gothic three-story structure is marked by towers centered on each of the street elevations. Windows are capped by lintels with contrasting brick while decorative concrete work highlights the entrances. The north block section stands as the original part of the building completed in 1920; the rest was added in 1927.

Built originally to house the new Franklin Middle School, tragic news of the death of one of Marshfield's young men fighting in World War I on July 4, 1918, caused city officials to change the name of the school in honor of this young man's heroism.

Willard Purdy, facing a horrifying reality, at age 23, gave his life to save the lives of his comrades. In charge of a party of raiders successful in crossing "no man's land" and bombing the German trenches, Purdy and his company returned to their dugout at the break of dawn. Details of what happened next were received by the Marshfield News-Herald in a letter from Vernon Kelley, who talked with members of Purdy's company and got the story from them first-hand: Upon their arrival back at the bunker they began divesting themselves of the unused hand grenades they carried, joking in the meantime about their night's experience. As Purdy pulled out one of the grenades from his blouse it slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor of the dug-out. Either from contact with his shirt or from the impact of the fall the pin that holds the ignitor was loosened and the device that explodes the grenade was set going. In just five seconds after the ignitor is loosened on the grenade it explodes, throwing its death dealing missiles in every direction.

The explosion meant the death of the entire party in the dug-out. Just one thing would avert that and that was the sacrifice of one life to smother the explosion. And Purdy gave his life to save his pals, With a cry of "look out boys" he threw himself upon the grenade covering it with his body. A second later the explosion came. Purdy's body was torn to shreds but he saved the life of his comrades.

On November 11, 1920, Marshfield's newest institution of learning was dedicated as the Willard D. Purdy School, "named in honor for a world's hero." That evening a bronze tablet, which came as a gift to the school from the citizens of Marshfield, was unveiled. The tablet being an engraved portrait of Purdy is now housed at the Upham Mansion.

The Purdy School served as both a junior high and senior high after McKinley High School burned in 1936. Also, the sixth-grade class of 1936-37 was taught there because of overcrowding in the grade schools. Vocational courses for adults were offered at night, and several presentations, productions, and speakers made use of the auditorium.

In 1971, Mid-State Technical College moved into the Purdy after the modern Senior High School was completed. Mid-State remained there until the construction of their new campus on West 5th Street. The Purdy building then stood vacant for several years until being purchased by Professional Realty and Development Corporation of Madison, Wisconsin.

Today, the Purdy building houses 53 apartments and is Marshfield's premier retirement community. The Purdy Retirement Community, which celebrated its Grand Opening September 12, 1996, offers an

alternative to active retired persons seeking independent, carefree living.

Besides keeping the Purdy name, much of the architectural integrity of the building was main-tained. Original doorways, windows, lighting fixtures and woodwork were left in tact wherever possi-ble. An original glass-doored bookcase from the principal's office was restored and moved to the building's lobby to serve as a history showcase. Photographs, textbooks, news clippings, copies of the Purdy Pilot (school yearbook) and other items on loan from former Purdy students will be on continu-ous display.

These memories of part of our community's past are truly treasures. We are grateful to those who are dedicated to preserving the Purdy's past and keeping it as bright as its future.

Submitted by Theda Kasner for the Marshfield History Project, Volume 1, "The Marshfield Story, 1872-1997: Piecing Together Our Past," pages 302-303.