

Religion on Campus and The Roger Williams Club, 1929-1960

Iowa State College (ISC) and First Baptist Church (FBC) evolved from the swamp flood plain along the Skunk River over the same years. The first class at ISC met from 1869 to 1873. FBC was founded in 1868 with the first church building constructed in 1872. The first ISC class was required to attend chapel after breakfast in 1869, led by one of the professors appointed by the first ISC president.

A formal relationship between ISC students and First Baptist Church began in 1917 when an FBC student organization was formed. A president and vice president were elected. In 1927, Theta Epsilon, a women's student Christian group was organized. In 1929 the Roger Williams House was erected funded by the national Board of Education, Northern Baptist Convention. (The house was named for Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in America, in Providence, Rhode Island). Reverend R.B. Davidson was in charge of the work. The house at 120 Lynn is pictured in the 1929 *Bomb*, the ISC Yearbook.

The Great Depression years were difficult. College enrollment decreased. Some sororities closed for a few years. However, by 1933 student attendance at the Roger Williams House had doubled. In 1940, sixty Roger Williams Club (RWC) students are pictured in the *ISC Bomb*. In 1942 RWC members numbered 110. Students sustained the senior choir. In 1944 two pages of the *Bomb* were dedicated to the RWC, 26 women committed to the Theta Epsilon, 47 students to RWC. Harris Seidel and Kathryn Bell Seidel were pictured. In 1946, thirteen men and twenty women were included in the *Bomb*, revealing the impact of WWII.

Following are notable dates and statistics related to student religious activities:

- 1948 RWC pictured in the *Bomb*; 50 students; no Theta Epsilon picture
- 1949 Roger Williams House sold as student ministry was incorporated into new church being built on Lynn Avenue
- 1954 45 RWC members pictured in the *Bomb*
- 1957 47 RWC members pictured in the *Bomb*
- 1959-60 No formal *Bomb* picture
- 1962 FBC's Covenant House at 304 Lynn Avenue pictured in the *Bomb*
- 1965 Last Baptist Student Fellowship (formerly RWC) report included in FBC annual report
- 1966 Last year the *Bomb* contained a section on student religious activities.

Student participation in the RWC, First Baptist Church, was vigorous from about 1930 to the mid 1950's. Excerpts from the 1948-49 annual FBC report provide an example of the RWC activities. Sunday evening programs included "Anticipating Alterations" and "The Dynamics of Christian Living." Members of the RWC attended conferences at Shurtleff College in Illinois; Green Lake Conference Center in Wisconsin; the Ecumenical Students Conference in Lawrence, Kansas; and seminars in Washington, DC and New York.

Deputation teams conducted worship services at Mount Pleasant, Plainfield, Storm Lake and Sac City. The social committee planned the "Sweetheart Banquet," Sunday night buffet suppers for 25 cents and quarterly parties.



Members of the Roger Williams Club, 1949. Alvarita MacBride (Rita Parrish's mother) is in the front row on far left end. Howard Johnson is fourth from left in the front row.

The RWC included undergraduates, graduate students and married couples. Several African-American students supported the Club including Eddie Easley, who became a faculty member in economics at Drake University. Another received a Ph.D. in Education to become Dean of Students at a school in the south. Ten RWC members who were active during the 1930 to 1958 years eventually became pastors after receiving degrees in agriculture, engineering and other areas. Three couples who were active in the RWC are current members of First Baptist Church: Harris and Katy Seidel, Jim and Helen Sassaman, and Howard and Pat Johnson.

The decline of interest and support of students in religious activities, and the loss of University and faculty advocates for Religion in Life Week at ISC provide a commentary on the change of people's values from about 1940 to 1960.

Howard Johnson, who wrote this article, served as president of the Roger Williams Club in 1949. He received bachelor's and master's degrees from ISC in Agricultural Engineering, an MS in Hydraulic Engineering from Iowa, and a doctoral degree in Ag/Civil Engineering (Soil Mechanics) from Iowa State. He retired as Department Chair of Agricultural Engineering in 1988. He met his wife, Patricia Larsen Johnson, in the Roger Williams Club. Pat was enrolled in the Cradle Roll at FBC in 1930 and is a lifelong member of our church. She is a 1952 graduate of Iowa State and was an instructor in Family and Consumer Sciences.