

Moorhead's First Armory

Mayor Williams posted a message a couple weeks ago announcing the renovation of Harris building, formerly the Moorhead Armory. Since that announcement, I've been asked by several people if I knew anything about that. After visiting with my friends, Mark and Markus at the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County, here is what I learned.

The Harris building was the first Armory building in Moorhead. The attached photo is from the Minnesota Historical Society showing it as the Armory. In 1932, according to a news report, the basement was flooded and the building became unusable. A new Armory building was built near the current location of the Moorhead Post Office with construction starting in 1935. This is the building most of us older folks remember and was the destination of Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Richie Valens when their small plane left Clear Lake, Iowa. The pilot of the plane was Roger Peterson who also died in the crash. Also of interest is that Waylon Jennings gave up his spot on the plane to The Big Bopper. This tragic crash was the event commemorated by the song The Day the Music Died. Several years ago, I stopped at the Surf Ballroom and the new owner allowed me to walk through the building. The Surf Ballroom was venue that hosted the musicians' last performance. Fifteen year old Robert Velline (Bobby Vee) from Fargo along with his band of high school students, the Shadows filled in for Buddy Holly and launched a very successful career. Of course we now have a very nice Armory located on 15 Ave N, the street was ceremoniously name BearCat Way by the City and Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Moorhead.

What happened to the flooded old Armory, you may ask. Where is that story. At a city council meeting on 6 May 1935, J. W. Harris of Harris Bros appeared asking for a building permit for repairs to the old Armory building, including extending the building to the property line to make room for a show room for his implement sales building and extending the back of the building for a ramp could be installed permitting autos to be taken to the basement for service. The permit was authorized leading the way to the building becoming a car dealership which it was for many years.

In an interesting article in the Moorhead Daily News from 12 June 1935, the Melvin E. Hearl American Legion post had to meet somewhere else for their 4th of July planning because the old Army was being renovated.

The Moorhead Daily News for 31 August 1935 reported the opening of the remodeled Armory as home of one the of largest implement dealers in the northwest. It also noted that the railroad tracks next to the building would make delivery of machinery and supplies much easier. In addition to farm implements, Harris also sold Studebaker cars and trucks. It later became auto dealerships.