

Feature Article

"The Roots of Student Center West and Baseball"

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(Picture of CIU in 1955)

With the recent name change of the **Chicago Illini Union (CIU)** to **Student Center West (SCW)** I thought it would be a good time to reflect on the history of the building which services the health professional programs of the University of Illinois at Chicago as well as to uncover some little known facts about our campus' **rich baseball connections**. Opened in 1942 at 715 S. Wood Street, CIU provided food service, recreational activity, meeting and study space for the rapidly growing student body of what was then, the University of Illinois Chicago Professional Campus.

Early on one of the big draws to CIU was the **Coffee Hours** which became a center of social life for students or their de facto **"living room."** As a graduate assistant I was a part of the revival of this tradition in the Recovery Room during the late 1990s. One of the biggest draws during my tenure in the Coffee House was **Thursday Nights** and **NBC-Must See TV**. My memories are of medical students huddled around the big screen television watching *ER* and critiquing the procedures being performed. This was just another tradition being carried on as CIU purchased its first TV back in 1949 much to the delight of students in need of

diversion. Even the annual Fun Fest we know today simply mirrors the **Campus Carnival** held during the 1940s-1950s.

In 1966 a new CIU was opened at 828 S. Wolcott Avenue. One major upgrade was the recreational facilities. This was helpful since CIU has always been a center for physical fitness and intramural sports. Many a medical, dental, or pharmacy fraternity team has squared off on the courts of the union. Governance had been handled by the Committee on Student Affairs which organized activities through three committees: Display, Music, and Social. This was carried over to the new location with the Campus Union Board. The fruits of its labor brought concerts in the Deli Lounge, Campus Feud, and in the early 1980s a **MASH** themed party.

Both locations in an earlier time were prime real estate for baseball fans. Unknown to many both the old CIU and SCW border on what was the old West Side Field, former home of the Chicago Cubs. The ballpark's boundaries were Wood, Polk, Wolcott (Lincoln at the time), and Taylor Streets. This is the current imprint of the College of Medicine Building and facilities. This is the last place the Cubs had any sustained success appearing in three straight World Series including a 1906 loss to the Chicago White Sox and back to back wins in 1907 and 1908 against the Detroit Tigers. They also lost to the Philadelphia Athletics in the 1910 World Series.

It was during this era that the Cubs perfected the double play combination of Joe Tinker, Johnny Evers, and Frank Chance. The Cubs also fielded a fine pitching staff of Mordecai "Three Fingers" Brown, Orvie Overall, and Ed Reulbach during this era. The university eventually purchased this

property in an effort to consolidate its professional colleges in medical education. The West Tower of the College of Medicine sits on the site of home plate, approximately where the dean's office was located. The ball field is the origin of some terms you may be familiar with. A left handed pitcher would face south and hence the term southpaw is derived from the old West Side Field. Finally, the Neuropsychiatric Institute was built over what was left field and this is where the phrase, **"way out in left field"** is born for something or someone that is a bit off or **"crazy."** To give equal time to fans of the newly crowned World Champion Chicago White Sox, the UIC campus has something for you too. Near the corner of Halsted and Polk Streets, about where the high rise for Student Center East sits there was an Italian café which was the site of the payoffs for the 1919 Black Sox scandal.

In closing here are a few thoughts, if you think parking is a problem nowadays around SCW imagine if the Cubs still played across the street. Picture the intersection at Clark and Addison the day of a game and count your blessings. Finally, while the mission of the Student Center has stayed the same I wonder what those in the late 1940s would think of us banning the sale of Coca Cola? I mean with all the **Coke dances** held...would they have renamed them **Pepsi dances**?

(Jason was a graduate assistant in the Campus Programs Department from 1996-1998 and fondly remembers his time working in CIU and living in SSR.)