

The Acme-McCrary Recreation Building

Out of the Acme-McCrary Hosiery Mills' belief that "a product of the highest quality requires happy, well-adjusted employees," and its concern for the "round-the-clock welfare of those in the organization," the Acme-McCrary Recreation Building was born.¹ Envisioned in the midst of World War II and opened in 1949, the facility provided a bounty of recreational, relaxation and social gathering opportunities for the employees and the community.²

Acme-McCrary, established in 1909 by D.B. McCrary and T.H. Redding as Acme Hosiery Mills, blossomed into Asheboro's leading industry and a worldwide innovator in the field of women's stockings and hosiery.³ By the company's 50th anniversary in 1959, it employed 1,800 workers over five plants in Randolph County and boasted a payroll of \$5 million. It had expanded into all types of hosiery, and operated sales offices in Asheboro, Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco and New York City's Empire State Building.

Even before the advent of the "McCrary Gym," as the building came to be known, Acme-McCrary was well established in local and regional recreation. In 1936, former Elon College basketball and baseball player Paul Cheek was hired as recreation program director. He oversaw baseball, basketball, volleyball programs, as well as horseshoes.⁴ The company fielded the McCrary Eagles basketball and baseball teams in the famed regional Textile League.⁵ Not only did these teams play against those from other textile outfits, they also took on college and university teams. This was serious sports: participants often were former college players who were recruited with offers of jobs, and who were paid a stipend per game. The Eagles claimed the state semi-pro baseball championship in 1937, and bested 73 teams to win the Southern Textile Basketball Tournament in 1939. Such victories were an occasion for pride among Acme-McCrary employees and raised the profile of the company. Just as the recreation building would become the home of the basketball team, Asheboro's McCrary Park was built during the same period to provide a home field for the Eagles baseball team.

By the time the recreation building was envisioned, Charles W. McCrary Sr. had become Acme-McCrary president. He became the driving force behind the facility, it was said, as a result of his experiences as a student at Davidson College.⁶ In the 1940s, a federal program was available to support companies that wanted to build recreational facilities for their employees, on the condition that ownership was turned over to the workers. In December 1943, Acme-McCrary announced the formation of the Acme-McCrary Employees Recreational Association, with a majority of the board of director consisting of employees. Acme-McCrary backed the association with \$126,494 (a value of about \$1.9 million today) earmarked for a building to be built when

¹ *Acme-McCrary: Fifty Years in Hosiery, 1909-1959*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards & Broughton Co., 1959), n.p., Randolph County – Industry – Acme-McCrary file, Randolph Room, Randolph County Public Library, Asheboro, N.C.

² "Acme-McCrary Organization Announces Formation Of A Recreational Association," *The Courier-Tribune*, 22 December 1943, 1; and "Asheboro Mill Workers Hold Annual Meeting," *The Greensboro Daily News*, 23 December 1949 [n.p.].

³ *Acme-McCrary: Fifty Years in Hosiery, 1909-1959*.

⁴ "McCrary Recreation Story Related for Sertoma Club," *The Courier-Tribune*, 21 May 1959, 11A.

⁵ Chip Womick, "City of Asheboro gifted ball park, gym," *The Courier-Tribune*, 31 May 2007, 5A.

⁶ Larry Penkava, "McCrary Gym was a gathering place," *The Randolph Guide*, 7 April 1991, 1.

wartime restrictions were lifted.⁷ Bids were let in April 1948, and the doors to opened on December 22, 1949.⁸

The building was an Art Moderne masterpiece designed by Henderson, North Carolina, architect Eric Goodyear Flannagan (1892-1970).⁹ Flannagan, a Virginia native, was known for his work on health and educational buildings throughout North Carolina.¹⁰ He certainly left his yellow-brick mark on Asheboro: in addition to the Acme-McCrary Recreation Building, he designed Randolph Hospital (1932) and Asheboro High School (1949-1950).¹¹ Charles W. McCrary Jr. told *The Randolph Guide* in 1999 that the design of the recreation building was influenced by the fact that the majority of the workforce was made up of women.¹²

Built at a cost of \$500,000 (about \$5.4 million today), the Acme-McCrary facility featured a 1,200-seat gymnasium/auditorium with collapsible wood bleachers and a stage, and a tiled, indoor heated swimming pool.¹³ In the basement was a four-lane, duck-pin bowling alleys with a soda fountain and jukebox nearby, and a full-service cafeteria. There were volleyball courts, ping pong tables, four shower and locker rooms, a meeting space, a reading room, staff offices and caretaker quarters. The top floor included a lounge with a television set, where locals would gather to watch the World Series at a time when few had television in their homes. Also on the top floor were two apartments, often shared by McCrary Eagles players.¹⁴ Few if any communities could boast of a similar facility. In later years, the bowling alley was repurposed for a weight room, and some of the upper floor space became an aerobics room.¹⁵

Available not just to employees but to local residents as well, the recreation building quickly became a hub of community life. The first basketball game in November 1949 saw the Eagles beat the Davidson College Wildcats.¹⁶ In 1959, Cheek reported that the cafeteria hosted 49 family night dinners and served 26 meals to area civic clubs.¹⁷ Organizations such as the Sertoma Club, the Optimists and Toastmasters used the meeting room. That same year, Cheek also said, 176 people were taught to swim. By the time of the facility's 50th anniversary in 1999, Smith Langdon, a later recreation director, estimated that some 7,500 people had taken swimming lessons in the pool.¹⁸ There were volleyball leagues and gym classes. It was also a social center,

⁷ "Acme-McCrary Announces Formation of a Recreation Association."

⁸ "Asheboro Mill Workers Hold Annual Meeting."

⁹ Heather Fearnbach, "Acme-McCrary Hosiery Mills," *National Register of Historic Places – Nomination and Inventory* (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, 2014), 8.

¹⁰ See Clara H. Flannagan, "Flannagan, Eric Goodyear," *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, Vol. 2 (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 207.

¹¹ Fearnbach, 32n55.

¹² Penkava, 1.

¹³ For a descriptions of the facility, see Fearnbach, 8-9; Penkava; Womick; and "Asheboro Mill Workers."

¹⁴ Womick, 5A

¹⁵ Chip Womick, "Before employee plans, there was Acme-McCrary," *The Courier Tribune*, 30 October 1999, 12A; and Fearnbach, 9.

¹⁶ Penkava, 1

¹⁷ "McCrary Recreation Story Related for Sertoma Club."

¹⁸ Penkava.

as Langdon told *The Randolph Guide*: “This was *the* place after school. From then until closing time, this place was alive with music and dancing. It was good, clean fun.”¹⁹

The popularity of the “McCrary Gym” nearly overwhelmed it, so in the 1960s access was limited to Acme-McCrary employees and their families.²⁰ With the transition away from semi-pro textile industry sports, the facility focused exclusively on the employees, with intramural and pick-up sports, swimming, and fitness classes.²¹ After Cheek, directors of the center included Hilliard Nance, Langdon and Ronda Hollidy.²²

When Acme-McCrary Corporation was sold to MAS Holdings in 2017, the employees association donated both the gym, now known as the Acme-McCrary and Sapona Fitness Center, and the ballpark to the City of Asheboro, and dissolved.²³ Having taken over maintenance responsibility for the ballpark some 30 years earlier, the city refurbished the gym and to give it continuing life as a community recreation center.

– *Ross A. Holt, 2019*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, and Womick, “Before employee plans...”

²² Penkava, 1.

²³ Womick, “City of Asheboro...”, 1; 5A.

Sources:

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The Acme-McCrary Employees Recreational Association, Inc.

Objectives

To promote and furnish recreational, educational, and literary opportunities and advantages for the employees of each mill.

To promote athletic games and contests by or for the benefit of such employees and their respective families.

To promote and provide educational and literary entertainment, opportunities and activities, to advance the training and promote the interest of such employees and their respective families.

To encourage social activities among such employees and their respective families to the end that they may become better acquainted with each other for the purposes of bringing about contentment and a harmonious spirit of cooperation.

– from “Acme McCrary Announces Organization of a Recreational Association,
The Courier-Tribune, 22 December 1943, 1.