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Breaking News

Hidden Place: Elcho locker rooms will soon be gone

It is a place where great triumphs have been celebrated and embarrassments shared.

And it will soon be gone at Elcho High School.

As part of the district's \$18 million construction and renovation project, the subterranean boys' and girls' locker rooms that were snuggled beneath the gymnasium are being entombed in a mix of insulation, sand and concrete.

It's still up in the air exactly how we are going to do it, Earl Doc Smith, the project's construction manager, said.

It's tricky work, because contractors are marrying various ages and styles of buildings into one new complex—and everyone knows the compromises that are required in any successful marriage—but the results sound promising.

Smith and his crews are lowering the level of the band room—another favorite haunt of the crew in far younger days—which was located behind the gymnasium and directly above the locker rooms, to match the latest school addition and revamping it into new locker rooms. That means massive concrete planks that served as the locker room ceilings and band room floor must be removed to allow access, demolition and finally burial of the rooms.

Those planks are huge, Doc said.

OK, a brief history lesson but not a boring one.

The locker rooms date to the construction of the 1968 school addition, when voters acquiesced and allowed the district to borrow \$500,000—the equivalent of \$3.6 million today—to construct an addition to tie the elementary and high school buildings together.

It was quite a project for the day and totally changed the footprint of the school, which was two separate buildings at the time. Encompassing 45,425 square feet, it included a music area, shop, seven new classrooms, main office and gymnasium and stage that remains rather spiffy looking to this very day, and, of course, those locker rooms.

But, unlike Doc's carefully coordinated and planned marriage of parts, the 1968 project seemed like more of a shotgun wedding.



Construction manager Earl 'Doc' Smith in one of the derelict Elcho locker rooms, soon to be gone.

In fact it was just weird.

The new structure was built in staggered series of levels, requiring steps up to the gymnasium stage and bandroom and down to the shop classes.

(There was also a long hallway that, rumor has it, was ideal for sending freshmen stuffed in Hunts and Gordie's big garbage cans on wheels for a ride but that is a story for another day.)

The old gym, located in the lower level of an elementary school, was converted into a cafeteria. The ceiling was dramatically lowered to almost claustrophobic levels and four new classrooms tucked in on the first floor, again with one of those sloping hallways.

It was, frankly, a hot mess.

But it worked for decades and decades.

Champions were crowned and dethroned in that gymnasium, and in those underground locker rooms, hundreds of sixth and seventh graders were introduced to the brutal world of communal locker rooms and junior high banter, in turn as cruel as a coop full of hens and as warm as a basket of puppies.

It is hard to imagine how many sets of Keds and Nikes jogged up those stairs and slogged down them after a gym class or a game.

Michelle Kincaid is an Elcho High School alumna, player, and coach.

The times I've run up those locker room stairs are too many to count. Michelle said. I remember our half-time basketball talks with Dean Curran and Mike Wisson, both of our coaches. They were intense at times.

Things have changed, she continued, recalling when coach and phy ed teacher Chris White, used to play her record albums in her teacher/ coaches office while we changed for gym class. We could plop on her futon and she would always crack some crazy joke. The teacher/coaches office isn't even used anymore. Her favorite album was the band Bread, one of my favorites now.

Michelle is in a unique position because she used those same locker rooms as a highly successful coach.

I reflect as a past student and now present coach having pregame, half-time, and post game talks with my players in the same spot that they did, she said. The same bathroom stall door that didn't shut in the 80s still doesn't shut. Not all memories were great—locker rooms are intimidating while growing up—but I survived, and thank goodness that crazy yellow slippery tile on the shower floor will be gone.

It's hard to let a school go, kind of like the family home or a treasured church.

But Doc promised that the new locker rooms will be sparkling, all on one level, and ready to serve new generations of athletes along with anxious middle

schoolers.

Maybe the phy ed coach will play a little 'It Don't Matter to Me, The Guitar Man or liven it up with some Truckin'.

That slipper yellow tile? It will still be there, under tons of sand and concrete.

(Hidden Places is an occasional Antigo Daily Journal column that explores some of the more unusual, interesting, historic or just plain strange places, people and things in the northwoods and occasionally farther afield. The crew is always looking for new ideas and willing tour guides. Contact Lisa at adjlisa@solarus.net, call the office at 715623-4191 or just stop in for a visit.)