A Dream in a Town Named Academy, South Dakota

Out in the middle of nowhere, an old white frame building is all that remains of a heart-felt dream that, as an answer to prayer, opened its doors in 1893 to a dozen kids who wanted an education not otherwise available in the Dakota Territories before the turn of the century.

A monument stands proudly out front, a tribute to the Rev. Mr. Lewis E. Camfield, a blood relative of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a fellow abolitionist, and almost as much a dreamer. The Reverend Camfield put legs beneath that vision to make an education available to pioneer kids still streaming into ex-reservation land, open country all around.

One day in 1892, Camfield went out among the new, white homesteaders of Charles Mix County and collected donations for the education of black children down South. At the end of the day, they had twenty dollars. They were thrilled.

If a hundred dirt-poor farmers could cough up that kind of money for needy kids a thousand miles away, shouldn’t it be possible, they thought, to create, a preparatory school right there for their own children?

So Reverend Camfield said he’d try, and a year later Ward Academy opened its doors to 23 students. In a few years, Ward had admirable facilities and close to 150 students. Tuition was nothing to sneeze at--$100. Most kids worked on the grounds and the farm to pay off that daunting bill.

In 1911, when the enrollment hit 148 students, Warren Hall was built, a monument three stories high—plus basement. Cost in total--$20,000. Warren Hall was “commodius,” or so the Reverend Camfield described it--a common dining hall, an assembly room, an office, and two dormitories—one for women, the other for teachers.
The broad prairie around Academy, South Dakota, is so flat and wide people like to say you can watch your dog run away for three days in any direction. Amid that land, try to imagine sky-scraping Warren Hall, a three-story monster, a battleship in the ocean of eternal land and sky.

For a time, Ward Academy was “velvet in a rugged new land of burlap green,” one old local history calls it, way out there, 27 miles from the nearest railroad.

Today, what’s left is a single frame building in a town that’s dying. Ward Academy hasn’t seen a student in almost 90 years, because 39 years after its birth, Ward Academy shut its doors. It was 1931—the dust bowl, the Depression, end of story.

Today, out front, a stone memorial commends the diligence: “To the memory of Dr. Lewis E. and Ella Woodman Camfield, founders of Ward Academy at this site in 1893, [who] dedicated their lives to the building of Christian character through church and school.”

Today, there’s nothing but a church, and it’s not a mega. It’s an old white frame place you might expect to appear as if out of nowhere here in the grassland. For years it looked as if it would someday soon just blow down and away.

I try make it a habit to stop by every so often. Something about the place is haunted. Or I am. So many dreams, so much hard work, so much dedication.

A month ago I stopped by again, first time in several years. I wanted to get a good picture of that stone memorial out front. It’s a fine granite monument that’ll stand long after what they built out here is completely erased from the prairie all around. I took a couple pictures of that front yard monument, got back in the car, and drove around the back of the old building.
You won’t believe it—something akin to gold was on all the corners, and there’s brand new yellow lumber under the steps into the back entrance. A bright new sheet of pressed wood is nailed in over a window that needed replacement. Tools were out there, as if ghost workmen would take up the job once more when I made my way out of the driveway.

Here’s the news. Pardon my braying. Someone is fixing up Ward Academy. Can you believe it? Someone is holding what’s left of a dream together.

Today, out back what you see is a thing of beauty.