

# From the Archives

## Preserving a unique heritage

By Kevin Thorie, University Archivist

There is no doubt that the University of Wisconsin-Stout is a unique institution. It has been this way since its creation in 1891. While Stout certainly wasn't the first manual training school, it was unusual in that it was integrated with the local school system and was largely financed by one individual. From its inception, Stout earned a national reputation in the field of education.

As early as 1904, a national magazine — *The World's Work* — stated that Senator James Huff Stout had created the "Best Public Schools in the World." It was that same year that an exhibit of student projects won Stout a gold medal at the St. Louis World's Fair; the only such medal awarded in that category. Through the years Stout has continued to receive such honors—most recently the Baldrige Award.

Through the years I have heard and read many opinions that people have expressed in trying to explain just what it is that makes Stout unique. Certainly being the only university in the UW System named after an individual rather than a city is unique, but outside of the state many other institutions of higher education have been named for individuals as well. Other factors mentioned include its high employment rate and the dedication of the staff and alumni. Again, these same qualities can be found in other colleges and universities. After twenty years of digging through the university's records, the only conclusion I can draw as to why Stout is so singular in its approach to education is the example and ideas of our founder himself.

James Huff Stout was a remarkable individual whose compassion for people and causes has had few equals. There is not enough space here to describe his many accomplishments (see Dwight Agnew's book "*James Huff Stout: Maker of Models*" if you want to learn

more), but a couple of stories may shed some light on how highly Stout was viewed by his contemporaries.

Stout lived during a litigious time when lawsuits were a dime a dozen. This was especially true for rich people. Lawyers were inexpensive to hire and court costs were low, so the wealthy were targets for anyone who had a real or imagined grudge. The company Stout worked for—The Knapp, Stout & Co., Company—along with its principle owners, were sued hundreds of times. For some reason, though, James Huff Stout was not named in one lawsuit.

Something similar happened in politics. When Stout was a resident of Menomonie there were two principle newspapers; the *Dunn County News (Republican)* and the *Menomonie Times (Democrat)*. Neither of the editors had anything positive to say about one another or about the other paper's political party. The one exception is Senator Stout. It is all but impossible to find a single negative story about the man from either newspaper.

Senator Stout's implementation of hands-on training, complimented by quality classroom instruction, has continued to be the mainstay of education here. From the beginning, students were taught to work with their hands as well as their heads. Through the years there have been both internal and external attempts to change this idea, but in an almost mystical sense the university always returns to its roots. I think this is one of the reasons that Stout continues to be a unique institution.

It is because of this uniqueness that I believe it is important for the history of this institution to be preserved. That, in part, is the role of the university archives. The archives preserves paper documents (*diaries, correspondence, meeting minutes, brochures, and the like*) and photographs. We are, though, unable to handle the artifacts that have been created as a result of

this hands-on education. Recognizing the importance of preserving such things, a group has organized in an effort to create a Stout museum.

What was to become known as the Stout Historical Association (SHA) began in early 2002 when a group of alumni, and retired and current university personnel began to meet with the goal in mind of establishing a Stout historical museum. The group proposed to display such items as drawings, photographs, documents, curricula, equipment and student projects to explain the vision, philosophy and innovation that made UW-Stout a leader in higher education.

By 2003, the group began to seek formal non-profit status. After exploring a number of options — including incorporating as a stand-alone organization, or as a group within the Stout University Foundation or the university itself—the Association entered into a mutually beneficial relationship with the Dunn County Historical Society (DCHS). The two historical groups' goals are nearly identical, though the SHA is more narrowly focused on the history of UW-Stout.

As part of the Society, the SHA will assist with exhibit space in the Russell J. Rassbach Heritage Museum in Menomonie that is devoted to James Huff Stout and the institution he founded. In return, the Stout group will greatly benefit from the professional expertise of museum staff.

The SHA also hopes to create exhibits at various locations on the Stout campus in addition to a "virtual museum" that would be available online to alumni who are unable to return to Menomonie in person.

I encourage Stout alumni to consider participation in the SHA's museum project by donating artifacts (*see below*) and joining the organization.



### Vision Statement

To discover, preserve, interpret and disseminate knowledge of the history of University of Wisconsin-Stout and its impact on education and society.

### Museum and Displays

Stout Historical Association exhibits will initially be located in the Dunn County Historical Society's Rassbach Heritage Museum, located in Wakanda Park in North Menomonie. From Highway 25 (exit #41 south from I-94) turn east on Pine Avenue and proceed into the park past Wakanda Elementary School and the Water Park. Turn left on Game Park Drive, then left on Wakanda Street.

#### Russell J. Rassbach Heritage Museum

1820 Wakanda Street  
Menomonie, Wisconsin 54751  
715/232-8685

**Hours:** Memorial Day through Labor Day – Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Winter – Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Noon to 4 p.m.

### Contribute to the museum

As part of the Dunn County Historical Society, the Stout Historical Association will assist with exhibits about the university for public view at the society's Heritage Museum in Menomonie, Wisconsin as well as on the Stout website and on campus.

The SHA seeks donations of physical objects or class projects made by students such as:

- ▶ Woodwork Projects
- ▶ Metalwork Projects
- ▶ Handmade Tools
- ▶ Sewing Projects
- ▶ Drawings and other Artwork
- ▶ Course Textbooks and Notebooks

Donations to the Association of these items, as well as financial contributions, can be made through:

**Stout Historical Association**  
c/o Dunn County Historical Society  
PO Box 437  
Menomonie, WI 54751  
715/232-8685

More information on donating these and other items, and joining the SHA is available from:

Website: [www.uwstout.edu/history/sha](http://www.uwstout.edu/history/sha)  
E-mail: [sha@uwstout.edu](mailto:sha@uwstout.edu)

The SHA also encourages donations to the University Archives of:

- ▶ Papers
- ▶ Diaries and Journals
- ▶ Correspondence
- ▶ Photographs
- ▶ Brochures/Programs

More information on donating these items is available from:

**Area Research Center**  
Library Learning Center  
University of Wisconsin-Stout  
Menomonie, WI 54751

Telephone: 715/232-2300  
E-mail: [thoriek@uwstout.edu](mailto:thoriek@uwstout.edu)  
Fax: 715/232-1783

General information about UW-Stout's history, including previous editions of this column are online at:  
[www.uwstout.edu/history](http://www.uwstout.edu/history)

