Stephen B. Humphrey and Saint John's Auditorium

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From the 1929 Sagatagan:

St. John's after the big snow storm

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Next week is the 25th anniversary of the death of Stephen Humphrey, in whose honor the St. John’s Performing Arts facility was named. (And whose funeral was poorly attended due to a snowstorm like today’s!)
In the old days, campus buildings weren’t named after big donors. They were generally named after a saint (Greg House, Frank House) or called what they were: the Quad, the Library, the Science Hall. In 1927 the Auditorium was built, with no fancier name.
I think it’s probably not unique to these campuses that having a building named after oneself can be as much a function of one passing away at an opportune time as anything else. Stephen Humphrey happened to pass away just when the auditorium was being renovated. (And S. Firmin Escher passed away last June…)

As anyone who has tried to name a baby knows, names matter. So do nicknames, and initials—often used in class schedules to designate buildings, for example. I think it must have been quite deliberate on the part of the IA people in the mid-80s to make sure Stephen Humphrey’s middle initial was included in the renaming of the Auditorium! (But I also wonder whether anyone gave thought to grouping the rows into the “AH” front section and the “PU” rear section!)
Stephen Humphrey came to SJU in 1927, the year the auditorium was built. He was a St. Thomas transfer. This is his page in the Sagatagan in 1929, the year he graduated. The 1928 yearbook had this comment about him: “If anyone doubts his ability to contend with those who wish to show how much, or how little, they know of philosophy, let him step to the fore. He will soon be squelched with such a natural flow of verbosity that he will soon “hit for home.”
He graced the stage that would later be named after him: he performed in a play in the auditorium, “Officer 666,” October 1928.

He was a member of the “august Alexian Literary Association, most ancient and elite organization of its kind at St. John’s, ... the melting pot for oratorical ambitions.”
He became the Features editor for *The Record* when he came.
He earned his Master’s at the U of MN in 1936 and briefly joined St. John’s faculty.
He served in the Army in WWII, attaining the rank of Master Sergeant.
He rejoined the faculty in 1946. Among other things, he was the faculty advisor to *The Record* for 10 years. (This photo of him was used in the yearbooks for about 10 years, too.)
He was a presence at events on campus. In his file there is some correspondence concerning his objection to Johnnie Rat antics at basketball games (which really did get out of line in the 70s!).

He also objected to the closing of the old road into campus, writing a letter to the editor of *The Record*...

He was sought as an advisor by students in every discipline, with his grasp of how liberal learning relates to careers and his discernment of each advisee's interests and aptitude.
He was known for his eloquent oral reading and enthusiasm for books and ideas.

“When stricken with laryngitis, as he occasionally was, he dazzled and amused his students by presiding over an entire class session using only a piece of chalk, a blackboard, facial expressions and a finger used as a pointer.”
This Jay Graham photo was used on the cover of both The Record and the alumni magazine to announce Mr. Humphrey’s retirement in May 1982. He was already ill with the lung disease that would kill him three years later.
The many tributes that poured noted his reputation for wit, wisdom, and for always having the right word or phrase to express a thought.

From the 1982 *Record* interview:

- “There are no women formally enrolled.”
- “Not formally enrolled, no, but I even cavit at that…”
  (Does anyone know the meaning of “cavit”?)

* * * * *

Mr. Humphrey wrote a letter to Lee Hanley, alumni magazine editor, referring to the magazine’s tribute as “ear-reddening.” He said:

“This was not my idea of a small announcement. After last year’s stories in *Community* and *The Record* I thought that any more would amount to indecent exposure….After this, the obituary notice can be very brief.”
In 1985 a 2.5 million dollar renovation was completed in which organ and choral practice rooms were complete, the main theater was reshaped and remodeled and the basement was completely renovated. The Auditorium-Music Hall was dedicated to Stephen Benedict Humphrey.

Teacher, mentor, friend to three generations of students, Mr. Humphrey - as his students knew him - was a model of liberal education at its best. He was all of a piece, his mind as well groomed as his dress. His diction flowed from his thought, precise without pedantry, knowledgeable without arrogance. He was a connoisseur of people and occupations. He delighted in a well turned phrase and a good argument. Above all, he delighted in friends and has as many as a generous lifetime among colleagues and students could well allow. To him this theater is dedicated.

http://www.csbsju.edu/Fine-Arts/General-Information/SBH.htm
Compiled in December 2009 by Peggy Landwehr Roske, CSB/SJU Archivist, from resources in the St. John's University Archives
Future Press Release?: CSB Presents Architect’s Model for Next BAC Renovation 😊