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Architecture, Like a Jigsaw Puzzle; Frank Cain Remembers WKU

A completed jigsaw puzzle lies on a drafting table in a basement surrounded by mementos of a life full of accomplishments. Piece by piece, the puzzle was put together until a multi-colored image of candy appeared, something that had a meaning.

With a proud smile, retired architect Frank Davis Cain Jr. reminisces as he stares at the puzzle and recalls his many other creations, also formed on a drafting table, in much the same way - piece by piece until there was something there with meaning.

The jigsaw puzzle is the latest of his many works.

What are some of the earlier ones?

E.A. Diddle Arena, Cravens Graduate Center and the Kelly Thompson Complex for Science North Wing, just to name a few.

Now 70 years old, Cain has watched Western Kentucky University develop over the last 38 years. Western did not have a full-time architect on staff in those days, so Cain oversaw nearly 50 different projects at Western before he retired from his profession in 1986.

Although he has been successful, Cain says that when he began his college education he had no intention of pursuing a degree in architecture.

"Sometimes you don't decide what you want to do; you just get pushed in," he said.

In 1941, Cain left his home in Madisonville, Ky. and went to Georgia Tech seeking a degree in aeronautical engineering. On Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed and the onset of World War II changed his plans for the future. He was in ROTC during his two years at Georgia Tech, and in 1943 he went on active duty in Patton's Third Army.

In 1946, he was released from the Army and returned to Georgia Tech where he got his degree in industrial management. He then returned home to Madisonville and went to work for his family's company, Western Kentucky Coal.

"I spent over three years there, but I just wasn't happy," he said. "It wasn't really what I wanted to do."

So again he returned to Georgia Tech, this time to seek a degree in architecture. He graduated in 1954 and thought about opening his own business, but another offer from an Owensboro firm came about first, and he accepted it.

Cain was offered a position as a resident engineer for an architecture firm known as Roberts and Johnson. This firm had been commissioned to build two dormitories on Western's campus, East Hall and South Hall.

"Working out there with the engineers on the dorms, being out there in the mud with them, let me know what architecture is all about," Cain said. "It's a lot more than just drawing pretty pictures."

During the time he was working on the dorms, Cain met Dr. Kelly Thompson, WKU's president from 1955 until 1969. When that job was finished, Dr. Thompson hired Cain to make additions to Van Meter Auditorium and to remodel Potter Hall.

"Dr. Thompson laid the foundation for us young folks," Cain said. "I guess he thought I just worked hard or something."

Cain started his own business in 1957. Two years later, he joined forces with Ben Johnson, who was a former partner of Roberts and Johnson. The two men did not become partners, but they were "associated architects."

"Dr. Thompson called us both into his office and said he had a project for us," Cain recalls. "He wanted a north wing built on to the Thompson Science complex, and if we stayed within the budget there would be other jobs for us to do."

They kept it $200,000 under their limit. Their next endeavor was what Cain described as a "bicycle wheel," - E.A. Diddle Arena. Even in the 1960s, the budget was a major conflict in Frankfort, but according to Cain, "Dr. Thompson had a way of getting things done."

"Dr. Thompson really went to bat for us," he said. "Diddle Arena took about one year and $27 million to build."

"We're very proud of Diddle Arena, and I think we had a lot of successful project," said Ben Johnson, Cain's former associate.

Cain's last joint venture with Johnson was Central hall. Cain had chosen to stay in Bowling Green and continue his work with the university, and there was plenty more projects to be done. As the student body continued to increase, so did the need for housing.

"L.T. Smith went to bat for me this time," Cain remembers.

Smith was the physical plant manager and also head of the industrial arts department in 1966 when Cain was hired to build Rodes-Harlin Hall. He said there was a lot of pressure to get the dorm finished.

"Dr. Thompson gave us one of his pep talks, and boy, did his pep talks work," Cain said. "We were there working the night before the dorm opened. Everybody was there, even Dr. Thompson himself!

"I remember one of the electricians had his son with him, and they were walking up and down the halls, putting in light bulbs. The son would hand them up to his father.

"Yeah," Cain said, nodding and smiling. "Those were the good times. One thing we had was spirit.

"I always gave my personal attention to projects from the drawing board to the dedication. The best feeling is when you see a building come to life like the kids moving into Rodes-Harlin," said Cain.

Cain also did a lot of work at Western during the time Dr. Dero Downing was president - from 1969 until 1979. Downing, now president of the College Heights Foundation, said Cain had a reputation as an outstanding architect.

"I have a genuine respect for his professional competency," Downing said. "Frank always had a sincere interest in the welfare of the University."

One of the projects completed while Dr. Downing was president was the Cravens Graduate Center.

According to Cain, the Center sits in what used to be a swimming pool. Cain said Cravens is the most interesting building he constructed because it was so difficult to orient it with the rest of the campus.

"It was at a weird angle and took some real creativity to make it fit," he said.

Controversy arose over the tree that now grows through the hole in the bridge that leads to the fourth floor entrance to Cravens.

"They wanted to cut it down," Cain said. "I said that was nonsense. We would just build around it. I thought it would live."

Among Cain's other major works are the Environmental Science and Technology Building, Tate C. Page Hall and Jones-Jaggers Hall. Some other projects included the entrance way of Cherry Hall, the addition of the journalism wing of Gordon Wilson Hall, renovations to several dorms, renovation of the president's home on Chestnut Street, and the overall project of making the buildings on campus more accessible for the disabled. His last project for Western was the renovation and expansion of the Kentucky Museum in 1978.

Dr. Henry Hardin, who retired as Dean of Academic Services in 1985, also worked closely with Cain during the time that much of the planning and construction was going on.

"Of course there were things we didn't always agree on, but that's normal," Dr. Hardin said. "We managed to build some pretty good buildings."

Cain also served the Western County Board of Education for 22 years, building almost all of the elementary schools and the Joel C. Brown Building for the Board of Education, and he designed several area homes, including his own at 1909 Cedar Ridge Road.

What did he most enjoy creating?

"I enjoyed them all," Cain said. "And I probably set some records for a one-man firm.

"As I look back, the only thing I would change is that I wouldn't want to be a small office. I would want to work for a firm. It is hard, because when you're finished, you're finished. You get a check, and you better go look for another building to build."

Cain said there was a lot of "pencil pushing" during his career. He never had any computers in his office.

"It's a different world today. The things I would work a whole day on can be done now on a computer in five minutes."

In 1983, Cain had to have heart bypass surgery, and continuing heart problems forced him to retire in 1986. He also lost a lung to cancer in 1990.

"Western has been mighty good to me," Cain said. "I was sorry to have to give up my career, but I didn't have much choice."

About the author: Karen Moss is a senior with a double major in public relations and psychology, and she's from Elkton, Ky. This story was written to fulfill a featuring writing class assignment in the Department of Journalism.