

OUT OF THE ASHES AND INTO EXCELLENCE

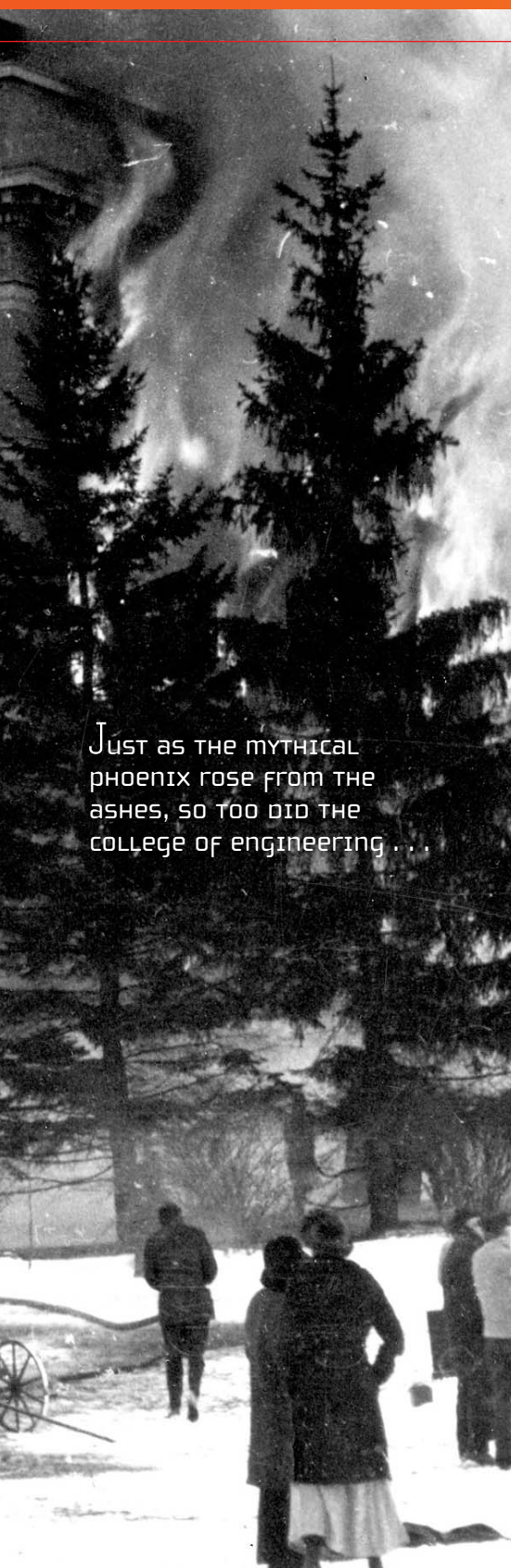
The Engineering School That A

BY LAURA LUPTOWSKI SEELEY



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Almost Wasn't



Just as the mythical phoenix rose from the ashes, so too did the college of engineering . . .

THE COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING owes its beginnings in 1885 to Edwin Willits, also known as “the father of engineering.” As president-elect of M.A.C., he recognized the need for a program in mechanic arts and proposed to the state legislature a four-year course of study.

“The purpose is to establish a first-class school of technology,” legislators wrote. In addition to drawing, drafting, and experimental physics, students would be taught English, book-keeping, and business law. The goal was for each student to be “well-fitted by a general and business as well as a technical education for any position he may seek.”

In his inaugural address on August 19, 1885, Willits stated: “Last winter, the Legislature was appealed to for means to erect the buildings and furnish the equipment . . . for the department of mechanic arts. The response was hearty, and an appropriation ample for the initiative of the new course was made, and the necessary shops are now being erected and the equipments [*sic*] being purchased.” Nearly 40 freshmen enrolled in the new four-year course when it was offered for the first time in September 1885. The engineering curriculum at M.A.C. seemed to be off to a strong start.

But after fire destroyed the Engineering Building and shops in the early morning hours of Sunday, March 5, 1916, a *Detroit Free Press* correspondent wrote: “On all sides, the prediction was freely made that Sunday’s fire had wound up the career of the engineering department.” All that was salvaged was some electrical equipment worth a few thousand dollars, and it seemed doubtful that rebuilding would be financed, since a similar program was already underway at the University of Michigan.

Over the years, there had been repeated discussion about combining the state’s engineering studies to create a single program in Ann Arbor. Now there was a renewed effort by the state legislature to move the engineering college to Ann Arbor to become part of the U of M College of Engineering instead of rebuilding at the Michigan Agricultural College (M.A.C.).

But the *Detroit Free Press* reporter and other naysayers were wrong. Before the legislature could meet, M.A.C. President Frank S. Kedzie and George W. Bissell, dean of engineering, had wired Ransom E. Olds—personal friend and Lansing’s industrial leader—in Florida, who gave \$100,000 toward rebuilding the engineering program at M.A.C. The R. E. Olds Hall of Engineering, constructed at the old site, was dedicated on June 1, 1917; this finally put an end to the attempt to move the engineering school to Ann Arbor.

The engineering program continued to operate out of Olds Hall until 1962, when a new building was constructed on Shaw Lane. That building was renovated and expanded in 1989. And in 1997, the Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Institute for Materials Research (known as the Dow Wing) was completed. ❁

The lists of department chairpersons and department milestones on the next several pages were compiled using faculty/staff directories, course catalogs, reports to the State Board of Agriculture, and other publications housed in the MSU Archives and Historical Collections. We have been very careful to ensure that the information published here is correct. However, if you detect errors or discrepancies, please let us know; we welcome your feedback.