JAMES BERTRAM “BERT” HILLS ARCH ’12

Church Architect, and a Co-founding Original Member of our Chapter

Bert hailed from Vernon, NY, where he was born April 18, 1888. He was the youngest of three sons of Edward and Caroline Hills, English immigrants, who worked their family farm near Vernon. He prepped at the Utica Free Academy, and entered Cornell in September 1908.

Bert’s only indicated Cornell activity was Alpha Theta. Bert joined two other seniors in the fall of 1911 – David Westwood “Kink” Carswell ’12 and Russell Hathaway “Tickets” Kent ’12 – to co-found the Alpha Theta fraternity at Cornell.

His Cornellian biosketch states, “A student at Cornell for four years, ‘Bert’ in that limited time distinguished himself as a man of character and ability. He and his charcoal were ever welcome necessities to an evening’s entertainment. To whom much is given, from him much can be expected, is an apt saying, particularly in his case.”

Bert registered in 1917 for the draft in St. Paul, Minnesota, and stated he was an architect / draftsman working with George Fussman in Aberdeen, South Dakota. On July 18, 1917, he enlisted in the 2d Minnesota Field Artillery. In 1917, he married Margaret Wittman, a Minnesota native born in 1893.

From 1919 to 1923, he lived and worked with Damon & O’Meara in Fort Dodge, Iowa.

By 1930, the couple had moved to St. Louis: Damon & O’Meara is now O’Meara and Hills. He and Margaret had a daughter Patricia, born in 1920 in Iowa, and a second daughter, Margaret, born in 1926 in Minnesota.

By 1940, the family was living in Delano, Minnesota, with Bert’s firm now called Hills, Gilbertson & Hayes. When one of his firm’s name partners, Mark Hayes died in 1956, the firm became Hills, Gilbertson and Fisher. It would remain such until Bert’s retirement.

The 1912 Cornellian’s Biblical injunction to Bert turned out to be most appropriate -- and prescient. Bert’s firm’s practice was principally designing institutional buildings, such as churches (of all denominations), convents, schools and hospitals. The University of Minnesota’s Special Collections Library holds the archives of his firm, including an extensive collection of plans, photographs, working drawings, renderings and job files of his works. They can be viewed at:

< http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/naa156.xml#series7 >

If you live in, or are visiting Minneapolis, or anywhere else in the North Central states, check out the catalogue, and visit one of his buildings. It’s a quite eclectic and ecumenical collection of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox churches, as well as hospitals, sanatoriums, and convents.

One of the finest examples of his firm’s work were the 1948 refinements to the Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Minneapolis, originally designed by Saarinen & Saarinen. The building is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places:
If you’re a Roman Catholic and feel you might risk excommunication by the mere act of setting foot in a heretic Lutheran church, or if you want to check out an original design, fear not, for I bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be for all Roman Catholics: you can check out his Church of Christ the King, also in Minneapolis:
If the Ukrainian Catholic tradition is your orthodoxy, then check out St. Constantine’s. Even if its not, check it out anyway: you’ll be most welcome, given the current difficulties in eastern Ukraine:

But you’re not permitted into any of his convents.

Bert died in January 29, 1979 in Anoka, Minnesota. He’s buried in the Delano Cemetery, Wright County, Minnesota.