

## **Avery Hall Rededication Ceremony, September 30, 2004**

Remarks by John C. Meakin, Chair, Department of Mathematics

Thank you, Chancellor Perlman and thank you, Senator Wehrbein. On behalf of the Department of Mathematics it is my pleasure to welcome you all to this rededication of Avery Hall.

This event opens a new chapter in the history of Avery Hall and a new chapter in the history of the Department of Mathematics. As I pondered the significance of our Department's move to Avery Hall, I thought that I would try to find out whatever I could about the man who lent his name to this building, and I wondered if I would find any tangible link between Samuel Avery, the building that now bears his name, and the faculty and students who now occupy this wonderful facility.

So I consulted my standard source of historical information about the University, namely my copy of Robert Knoll's "Prairie University: a history of the University of Nebraska". I discovered that Samuel Avery was a prominent chemist and member of the faculty here who was named Acting Chancellor of the University in December, 1908, and served as Chancellor from 1909 to 1927. Avery presided over this university for a very long time, in fact his has been the longest tenure so far of any of the University's Chancellors. Avery's tenure spanned a difficult period in the University's history that included the Great War and several other challenges for the University. I set aside Professor Knoll's book, much better informed about Samuel Avery, but not at all informed about his connection to mathematics, computer science, or the practitioners of these great disciplines who now occupy this building.

I felt enormously grateful that administrative decisions and good political will in the legislature had combined to see the wisdom of renovating this building and relocating our department in such a fine facility, but I felt some lack of connection with Samuel Avery himself and with the early history of the University. That changed one day last spring when I walked over here with Bill Leavitt, one of the distinguished emeritus faculty members of our department. Some fairly serious historical perspective began to build as we were walking over to Avery Hall, when Bill reminded me that it was exactly 50 years ago that he had assumed the position of Chair of the Department of Mathematics. Bill was an undergraduate student here and later served on the faculty in mathematics from 1947 until his retirement in 1986. Bill has the enviable distinction of having published serious mathematical research papers in eight different decades.

When we entered Avery Hall that day last spring, Bill and I donned our hard hats (Avery Hall was still an active construction site last spring) and we started wandering through the building. As we reached the third floor, around about where Jim Lewis' office is now located, Bill told me that that was where Avery's lab used to be and that that was where he met with Avery for lunch at noon every day. Intrigued, I prodded for more information. It turns out that Samuel Avery was Bill Leavitt's uncle (well, more precisely Avery was the uncle of Bill's half brothers), and that Bill had a close relationship with

Avery during the last few years of Avery's life, while Bill was an undergraduate here. Bill would bring a box lunch to Avery's lab each day, Avery would brew up a pot of tea in a beaker on his Bunsen burner, and the two of them would talk at length and eat lunch together every day.

**Bill Leavitt is in the audience today, Bill could you stand and be recognized?**

I must say that I feel that my hope for some historical continuity that connects Samuel Avery, this building, and the mathematicians who now occupy the building has been fulfilled. I must also say that I am left with a very positive impression of Samuel Avery and his contributions to this University, despite the fact that Avery once confessed to Bill that he regretted having learned no mathematics beyond trigonometry!

Our move to Avery Hall comes at a most opportune time. In fact, with a substantial increase in the size of our graduate program and a steady stream of long term research visitors and postdocs attracted by the intellectual environment in our department, we have completely filled our space in the building already: it is difficult to imagine how we could have accommodated the department's needs this year without the additional research space that this building provides us.

Our department is nationally known for its research strength, its efforts to mentor student achievement, and its extensive mathematical outreach program, all of which will be significantly enhanced by the physical environment in this building. Avery Hall is a fitting home for a research department on the move, one that is now widely recognized as a major player on the national mathematical stage. Within the past four months, faculty in the Department of Mathematics have brought to UNL almost \$9 million in new federal grants and contracts, much of it earmarked for initiatives that link research and educational endeavors. Even as we were moving in to the building this summer, we were finding space in Avery Hall to run our summer Research Experiences for Undergraduates program, and a pilot program for our recently announced Mentoring through Critical Transitions Points grant, both funded by major awards from the National Science Foundation. Avery Hall will become the home to a strong partnership between the University, the Lincoln Public School System, and several other school districts across the state, as we seek to lead the nation in the mathematical preparation of teachers, again funded by a major grant from the National Science Foundation.

The renovated Avery Hall provides elegant and spacious office, work, and research facilities for our faculty and graduate students, who are now housed together in the same building for the first time in well over 30 years. The building is replete with student computer labs, high tech classrooms, a modern mathematics and computer science library, space dedicated for our undergraduate mathematics student organizations, and space designed to foster interaction between faculty and students in mathematics and computer science. Students have access to wireless computer networking, an excellent student resource center, and student-friendly work areas scattered throughout the building. Classrooms and seminar rooms are dually equipped with an abundance of writing surfaces and with state of the art projection equipment that allows sophisticated

multimedia presentations. Many interesting architectural features were preserved in the renovation, adding to the elegance of the building, and preserving the historical integrity of the original structure.

**It is, quite frankly, a pleasure to come to work here each day in this building.**

To Senator Wehrbein and his colleagues in the legislature who had the political will to fund the renovation of this wonderful building, my heartfelt thanks and appreciation. To those in our administration whose actions enabled preservation of Avery Hall and the relocation of our department to the building, I would also like to express my thanks and appreciation. To Alan Wedige, project manager for the Avery renovation project, and to the architects and builders who designed and remodeled this facility, my congratulations on a superb job. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not publicly acknowledge the work and insight of Jim Lewis, my predecessor as chair of the mathematics department, who spent countless hours working with Rich Sincovec on the plans for this building, and who provided essential impetus for many of the student-friendly features in the building. Avery Hall is now a first class facility that will enable the Department of Mathematics to achieve its vision of national leadership in the profession. My thanks again to all involved in providing us with this facility.