In the end, it was about memories. In between, it was about a man who could not be there and a building that still was.

About 60 alumni from the Theatre Department of the former Marymount College gathered in Salina Aug. 1 and 2 to remember, to reminisce and to reconnect.

Alumni came from as far as Vermont, Texas, Montana and Alabama to share stories, flip through scrapbooks and celebrate the work they did at “One of the best (theater) departments in the country,” according to Dr. Dennis Denning, who chaired the department for more than 20 years until the school closed in 1989.

Denning was speaking from his hospital room in Salina. He was not able to attend the event due to an untimely bout with pneumonia. But over the course of the weekend, most of the alumni who gathered for the reunion made time to visit him.

Former students found him in good humor and sharp as ever when recalling the more than 165 shows that were produced under his direction. At the brunch on Sunday morning, Denning’s son Gary, said, “Certain groups of people bring energy to others. For Dad, these students gave him that.” Gary was among several of the Denning family members who attended the Saturday evening event at the Salina Country Club.

Pam Kerrihard Sollars ’84, a member of the planning group, noted that Denning was helping to direct the event from the hospital. “He was making sure things were done in a classy way.”

The weekend included an informal gathering Friday night at the home of Trudy Bricker ’80. Saturday’s activities started with a tour of the Fine Arts Building, now the Kansas Highway Patrol Training Center. Trooper Alan Lytton graciously allowed the alumni to wander through the spaces where they had once built sets, designed lighting schemes, donned costumes and entertained thousands of patrons and schoolchildren from across central Kansas.

The highlight of the tour was evident with gasps, laughter and a few tears as the group made its way into the Big Theatre. There hung the drop from the final production, listing all the shows produced throughout the history of the department. It was created by the department’s last technical director, Steve McCurly, who was in attendance. McCurly said it took him two weeks to lay it out and paint it. “It is really touching that the KHP kept this all these years,” he said.

Trooper Lytton said he found the drop some years back. “Now I put it down every time we do a Marymount tour,” he said. “It is important to preserve this history.”

“Walking through the building and seeing that drop brought back so many memories,” said Barb Evans Nichols ’85.

Jane Corman Anderson ’81 best summed up the thoughts of the group about the building when she said, “I used to be depressed when I went by. But this time I felt happy that the campus is being kept up and re-used for a new purpose.”

On Saturday, alumni also had the opportunity to tour the former Administration Building, now being renovated into condominiums by the family of architect Don Marrs. Mass was said in the Chapel by Father Frank Coady. Many of the alumni are active in their home parishes, so musicians and lectors were readily available for the service.

Saturday evening the group came together at the Salina Country Club. Patty Reed VanSlyke ’80 and Phil Kinen ’83 were the emcees for the evening. They began by lighting a candle in memory of faculty, staff and students who are no longer with us, then moved on to sharing stories and Armadillo Awards. There were four musical performances by Michele Cardinal Dolan ’89, Sharon McGuire ’77, Patty Reed VanSlyke ’80 and Teri Morrison Johnson throughout the evening.

Tom Dennis ’84 prepared a slide show with photos from each of the productions and some backstage photos as well. Actor Tyrees Allen ’78 talked about how Denning and Marymount changed his life and the lives of all those present.

Holding court with a group of former students in his hospital room, Denning articulated the importance of the reunion: “When you do art, you have a painting or a sculpture when you are done. When you do theatre, when you are done you have a memory.”