No boxelder bugs were present at the English Department’s April birthday party to recognize Ray B. West Building’s 100th. At least, they weren’t invited. (Photo courtesy Evelyn Funda)

Generations of students in Ray B. West come to terms with boxelder bugs, maybe even grow to love them and the building.

It’s only thanks to the little guy in the magician’s cape that Ray B. West got a birthday cake.

In fact, no one would even have known Ray B. West’s secret if it hadn’t been for that student chased from a restroom.

So, happy birthday and kazoo greetings to the building that houses the English Department. Never ones to pass up a party opportunity, English students and faculty taped up cheery letters reading “HAPPY 100TH” and sat down for some serious cake.

No boxelder bugs were invited.

Here’s the back story.

Makensey Swanson, a junior studying English Education with a Creative Writing composite, was pondering an appropriate topic for a semester-long research project when a bug buzzed lazily through her line of vision.

OK, maybe it didn’t happen exactly that way. But, it is true that few students who’ve taken classes in Ray B. West have not encountered the building’s uninvited and unloved tenants: boxelder bugs.

These little devils alight on hats, wave antennae from behind books, swoosh by at eye level. “They were crawling in and out of the electronics and computers where it’s warm, coming out all over the place,” says Annie Nielson, the department’s finance officer.

“The bathroom really scared me,” remembers Swanson. “I vowed to never use that bathroom again because there were so many bugs in it.”

Well, the light bulb of inspiration clicked on – how about a study of the boxelder bug ball in Ray B. West? – and Swanson, too, drifted toward its warmth.

Swanson presented the idea to her faculty research adviser. Well, she was told, an entire project on Ray B. West’s boxelder bugs may be a bit shallow, but perhaps she could discuss the myriad of distractions presented by a century-old building. (This is probably the time to bring up the clanking radiator in the Ray B. West dungeon.)

Swanson’s initial research soon morphed into a curiosity-fueled trip through the history of the Ray B. West Building. She came upon a fact that the building had either been hiding for decades, or no one cared to remember: It was built in 1918 as a barracks for World War I soldiers-in-training. 2018 is its centennial.

Along the way, Swanson realized that she, well, loved Ray B. West. In fact, she found that affection to be a common theme in a survey she conducted among more than 70 students and faculty.

“Many of them said the distractions in the building lessen the longer you’re here,” said Swanson. “The bugs don’t bother me any more just because I’ve been in it so long.” And that goes to validate the point made by CHaSS Dean Joe Ward. The boxelder bug, he explains, “is not a bug, it’s a feature.”

The U.S. Army may have originally built Barracks No. 1 and the mess hall, as it was called, but it was sold to the university within a couple of years, according to Swanson’s research. Engineering was its first non-military resident; later, the Department of Education moved in. No one is sure when it became home to the English Department. Annie Strickland believes it was some time in that forgotten decade, the 1980s.

The boxelder bugs seemed to have arrived with the installation, in the building’s early decades, of box elder trees along the sunny southern side. Things got pretty crowded for a long time as boxelder bugs flocked to the box elder trees and sunned upon Ray B. West’s warm bricks.

Conditions improved 100 percent when, in 2009, the university installed new, tighter windows and removed the offending trees, said Nielson.

Over the years, the English Department has taken a “laugh-to-keep-from-crying” attitude. In 2002, the Order of the Boxelder was formed by an accidental advocate: visiting scholar Robert Michael Pyle, who holds a Ph.D. from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Although a lepidopterist – an expert on butterflies and moths – Pyle was at USU to study nature writing. In the years since then, he’s written Butterflies of the Pacific

Pyle gave his English Department colleagues, who were conflicted about the insects’ presence, his word that the boxelder bug was nothing more than a nuisance, (though, one faculty member who responded to Swanson’s survey swore he’d been bitten by one).

“Boxelder bugs are native insects here,” he said in an email at the time. “These bugs are not plant pests of any significance, they do not transmit disease, bite, sting, or otherwise harm humans. … In short, they do no real harm.”

On the upside, he added, “if you look at them closely, they are quite beautiful, especially when they fly, revealing their fire-red abdomens.”

Swanson, too, has settled into a tenderness for the building and its bugs ... um, endearing quirks.

“I don’t want this to define Ray B. West,” she said. “All these things bind us together and help us become more of a unit as an English department.”

Just who was Ray B. West?

The name harks back to the building’s years as home of the Engineering Department. Ray Benedict West Sr. was an engineer, teacher and administrator from 1912 to 1936. Interestingly, Ray B. West Jr. (1908-1990) became a USU English professor. His papers and research are archived in the Merrill-Cazier Library, Special Collections and Archives Division.