

OMAHA NORTH HIGH SCHOOL

A Diamond Anniversary History

The thousands of alumni of Omaha North High School share a unique heritage.

This is the story of a school built in 1924 to fill a pressing need . . . a school which, through academic and athletic excellence, climbed to the top rank among educational institutions . . . a school which suffered from the tension of social change and population shifts and slipped to the bottom of the ladder . . . and a school which responded to change, righted itself, and rose again to an exalted position among the schools of the state and nation.

Viking alumni everywhere rejoice in its current success and stature.

* * *

The Omaha School Board voted to build a new high school to serve the growing population of north Omaha, and a site south of Ames Avenue between 31st Avenue and 33rd Street was selected. It had once been the site of a ballpark. A foundation was dug and construction was ready to start when seepage from underground streams ended the project.

Another location was found, four blocks to the west, but at the top of the hill stood a 25-foot-tall clay bank. The solution was to cut down the clay bank to level the new school site, and to cart the dirt down Taylor Street to fill in the hole between 31st and 33rd.

The construction of North High took place between 1923 and 1924 at a cost of about \$1 million. Many of the school's first students were to be transfers from Central High School, and so was the first principal, Edward E. McMillan.

On September 2, 1924, the doors were opened to 776 students, 345 of whom were eighth-graders from the area's packed grade schools. North then had a declining number of eighth-graders until the middle of the 1928-29 school year.

Traditions started immediately. There were three North Stars issued during the first semester, and several clubs and organizations were formed, including Hi-Y, Boys Student Opinion (BSO), a drama club, and the Student Council.

Athletic success was slow at first, as might be expected, but North did win its first district basketball tournament in 1925, and followed that with a city title in baseball in the spring.

It was to be the 1927-28 school year before North won championships at the state level. Don Boyd won the State Pentathlon that year--a test of 5 academic pursuits--and Bert Nelson won both the long jump and the high jump at the state track meet.

The first yearbook, the Polar Log, was published in 1926, at the end of North's second year. It was to last until the economic woes of the depression caused its cancellation after the 1931-32 school year.

National prominence came to North High in May 1932, when three North debaters won the national debate championship over 47 other teams from 24 states. Viking students listened to the final debate over the radio in the auditorium, and according to the North Star "North went mad with joy at her new glory," when the judges' votes were counted.

The depression took its toll on North, as on the rest of the country. Gone were the yearbook, any lingering hopes for a swimming pool (as its vacant space needed to be turned into a study hall--the fabled 030), and even "Viking Day," a season-ending day of celebration as the North football team took on South High, went by the wayside.

Similarly, World War II impacted North High. Boys took accelerated courses so they could graduate in less than 4 years. There were metal scrap

drives and ration books. Sadness filled the halls when news came of the wartime death of a former Viking.

The service roll of honor made in the shop classes showed 1,711 names of alumni serving in the war effort by war's end. 77 names, 76 boys and 1 girl, had a gold star next to them; 77 former Vikings who had fallen during the war.

In 1945-46, the decision was made once more to publish a yearbook--after all, every other school had one--and The Norseman was born. In its 1946 edition, it highlighted seniors only, but thereafter it was an "all-school" yearbook.

Wrestling, which had been abandoned during the war, was revived in the 1946-47 school year, but that year will always be remembered as well for the deaths of two teachers in the school building and two students, one of them in an accidental shooting at her home.

The fifties were, well, the fifties, years of relative tranquillity at North High as well as most of the rest of the country. A new tradition - Homecoming - was started in 1950. Mr. Meents retired in 1952. He was succeeded in the principal's office by Kenneth Burkholder.

Kenneth Burkholder left North in 1963 and was followed by Harold Reeves.

And the fifties were followed by the sixties. Trouble loomed on the horizon as events beyond North's control impacted the school and would forever change it. The change in North's racial composition, which came about as a result of population shifts, and integration plans - and the tension nationwide over matters of race - brought to North a time of troubles.

Mirroring national events, North Vikings faced their share of problems in the late 1960's and the 1970's. There were troubles in the hallways, student walkouts, fights after school and in nearby streets. In an effort to better control the campus, the east side was fenced. . creating an impression it would take North years to correct.

In 1969 friends of the school, students and faculty took out a one-page ad in the Omaha World Herald to correct the public impression of the school which came about from reports in the media.

By 1977 the World Herald put out its own one page article about North, one - happily - which was headlined "Peace at North High" and told of great progress and the easing of tensions at the school. James Friesen became North's principal in the next year.

While many of the events of the troubled years marred the memories of North High then, it is a point of pride for Vikings of all eras that the school was strong enough to overcome the substantial problems it had faced.

The dreaded fence came down and two proud alumni groups grew to help the school celebrate the heritage of the past and the present - the Alumni Boosters group and the Vikings of Distinction "hall of fame" program.

In 1986 James Friesen retired and North's first black principal, Thomas Harvey, went to the helm.

North's rebirth was aided substantially by the magnet school concept that named North the computer and technology magnet for the Omaha Public Schools, and ambitious plans for a complete building renovation were started by a farsighted committee in 1988.

Each winter, as the plan matured, North would be visited by hundreds of potential Vikings as 8th graders and their parents would come to visit on a Sunday afternoon. Vikings started to come to North from all over the city, some in their own cars and many in the countless yellow buses which were to serve as signs of North's increased popularity.

North developed the Classroom of Tomorrow, building on the natural popularity of computers, and Vikings won national title in geographic competition. Russian and Japanese began to be taught, and computers were everywhere.

We finally started to win our own pre-season wrestling tournament, something that had never happened, and several state championships as well. We started to place in the Odyssey of the Mind competition, and began to move up on the schools that traditionally won the statewide Academic Decathlon competition.

In 1994 the World Herald's lead editorial was titled "Omaha North's Return to Excellence" and it told of academic success and achievement, national recognition and a renewed spirit. Pride was contagious.

The 1997-98 school year was ushered in with a surprise. Tom Harvey had been given a position in the administrative offices of Omaha Public Schools, and the new principal - like North's first principal, an assistant principal at Central High - was Mrs. Bernice Nared.

Mrs. Nared's first year was one of super achievement at North. Honor followed honor. . the Academic Decathlon team won the state championship and did very well in national competition. . the girls' basketball team won the state tournament. . two ROTC cadets earned the highest awards presented by the ROTC program. . we had girls winning first places in swimming, boys winning the Metro track title, an undefeated wrestling state champion, the Metro cross country champion, and the journalism department tied for first place in the state journalism contest.

At year's end an Alumni Directory was in process, as was this 75-year history of the school. A committee of interested staff, students and alumni - under the leadership of curriculum specialist Peggy Pavlik - was meeting to plan for celebratory events during 1999-2000, North's 75th year of operation.

North continued its winning ways in 1998-99, and added to its rich tradition, with a wrestling state championship, repeat first place finished in the journalism contest and the Academic Decathlon, Metro basketball championships for both the girls and boys teams, a second place finish for the girls at the state tournament, a Metro cross country champion, two wrestling individual champions, a state swimming champion, a member of the All Metro Academic team and two on the second team. It was a breakthrough year of the soccer program, as the boys lost their first six matches and then went on a torrid streak which. took them to the state tournament and an upset over last year's state champion.

Bring on the 75th anniversary, the Millennium and an even brighter future for North High.

The pride that unites Vikings of all eras is strong and enduring. Vikings have seen the school fall far from the heights, struggle through the trouble years, and rise Phoenix-like back to the top.

The roller coaster ride that is the history of Omaha North High School is a story which earns the admiration of all who pay it heed.