Northern State has survived fires, wars, evolving mission since creation in 1901

Aberdeen university celebrating 125th anniversary this school year

By Jason Lopez Martinez · September 23, 2026 in Education, Featured, History, News Reading Time: 6 minutes



Northern Normal and Industrial School students and alums stand in the form of an N on the football field during the 1920s. Photo courtesy of Beulah Williams Library Archives and Special Collections.

Editor's note: *This is the first of a two-part feature on the history of Northern State University. The second part will be published next week.*

Before any students arrived on campus, Northern State's first building had burnt down.

The school was authorized by South Dakota lawmakers in 1901. Construction of Central Hall, to be used for classrooms, was nearing completion when flames gutted it that December. But the structure was quickly rebuilt, and classes started the next fall, according to the book "Northern State University: The First Century 1901-2000" by Mark Bartusis, who used to teach history at NSU.

It was an appropriately difficult beginning for a college Aberdeen spent years fighting to get, and the path forged since then hasn't always been straight.



Northern is celebrating its 125th anniversary this school year. It's trained generations of teachers, which is primarily why it was created, though its scope was wider even then.

Through fires, wars, new buildings replacing old ones, advances in technology and programs coming and going, there have been plenty of changes on campus.

MORE: LaFave looks forward to writing Northern State's next chapter

But a wooden pen has survived it all.

The pen was used by Gov. Charles N. Herreid, who lived in Aberdeen, to appropriate $50,000 to create what was originally called Northern Normal and Industrial School.

Nearly 90 years later, the pen was again used when Northern State College was renamed Northern State University in 1989. It then orbited the globe in space.

That was nearly three decades after Central Hall was destroyed by a second fire in 1961. Temporary classrooms were arranged before Mewaldt-Jensen Hall was built in its place two years later at a cost of $960,000.

Bartusis' book, which includes a comprehensive history of the school's first 100 years, was used as a reference for much of this story.

Aberdeen fights for a school

Northern almost didn't happen.

On Jan. 7, 1899, state Sen. James M. Lawson introduced legislation to establish a normal and industrial school in Aberdeen with the aim of educating teachers. Other fields of study included industrial and mechanical trades, agriculture, science and more.

Supporters argued northern South Dakota deserved its own state institution, but Gov. Andrew E. Lee disagreed.

He vetoed the bill in February, arguing that creating another normal school would give South Dakota more than it needed. He acknowledged that northern South Dakota did not have its fair share of state institutions, but said the state should wait to create another school.

The Aberdeen Daily News didn't take the decision well, running a story with the headline "Spiteful Andy Harpoons Aberdeen Bill Because Springfield Made Him Mad."



The former Central Hall on the Northern State campus burnt down twice. The first time was in 1901 before the school even opened. The second time, pictured above, was in February 1961.Photo courtesy of Beulah Williams Library Archives and Special Collections.

An accompanying editorial noted Lee's veto represented "as gross an exhibition of smallness of soul and general cussedness as the country has ever witnessed."

But, Aberdeen eventually won the fight as Northern opened in 1902.

The young campus was built on prairie ground that early sources described as little more than a wheat field, and students did not disagree.

"Our campus has not bubbling brooks: it is not situated on a pretty wooded hill; it does not overlook a winding river," *The Exponent* student newspaper observed in 1921, "but it does have the best man can give it."



By then, the space between campus buildings had developed into what was called the Oval, a gathering place landscaped with shrubs and flowerbeds. The 1922 yearbook called it one of the prettiest places on campus.

Northern was beginning to look less like a school dropped onto the prairie and more like a college campus, and students were starting to form traditions.

An unanswered call

In October 1915, Northern student Charles Fleischman slipped an anonymous suggestion into *The Exponent*. Northern should have a homecoming celebration, he wrote, and call it Gypsy Day based on South Dakota State University's Hobo Day.

When nobody responded to that call, he tried again the following spring.

"Last fall a 'Gypsy Day' was suggested for the coming fall, and opinions were asked," Fleischman wrote. "Yet not a single response has come."

The second attempt sparked what remains Northern's homecoming celebration.



A group of nurses walks through downtown Aberdeen during the 1930 Gypsy Day Parade. Photo Courtesy of the Beulah Williams Library Archives and Special Collections.

During the first first Gypsy Day in November 1916, about 700 students and 50 faculty members took part in a parade with cars, horses, wagons and a brass band. There was a carnival, dancing, races, a coronation and, naturally, a football game.

The parade grew quickly in the years to come.

By 1922, it stretched about a half-mile. A year later, estimations were that it was about 2 miles long with roughly 50 floats.

What began as a student homecoming increasingly belonged to Aberdeen, too, with events for the entire community.

Duke Ellington and his orchestra visited Northern for Gypsy Day in 1948, performing during the celebration and appearing in the parade.

For Northern's 50th anniversary celebration in 1952, more than 20,000 spectators were expected for the afternoon parade. Organizers served more than 500 pounds of barbecued buffalo, and two dozen bands participated in halftime festivities during the football game.

Two years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and first lady Mamie Eisenhower were named honorary Gypsy Day marshal and queen during a visit to Aberdeen.

By then, even Fleischman was astonished by what his suggestion had become.

"When I, as editor of *The Exponent* in October 1915, inserted the anonymous suggestion for an annual homecoming day, I did not dream that it would become an attraction far beyond the borders of the campus," he wrote in 1950.

MORE: Northern State University's fall enrollment up 4% as number of incoming freshmen jumps by 16%

The tradition continues, though concerns about its moniker have been raised from time to time. In 2021, Northern started a process to move away from the word gypsy, which is considered by some to be a racial slur to the Romani people.



Northern eventually decided to retain the name Gypsy Day, though some groups voiced concerns about that name. The vast majority of feedback about the proposed change was against doing so, university officials said at the time.

The name was selected because traveling gypsies or fortune tellers would pass through town during that era. While it remains, Northern and the community have generally moved away from what was once a tradition of dressing as fortune tellers and the use of gypsy iconography.



Northern Normal and Industrial School students and faculty pose for a photo on campus on May 27, 1915. Photo courtesy of the Beulah Williams Library Archives and Special Collections.

World wars disrupt Gypsy Day

Not every tradition can continue without interruption.

The school canceled its homecoming in 1918 as World War I and a Spanish flu epidemic disrupted campus life. A celebration was held the following spring instead.

Students were pulled into the war effort in a variety of ways. While some served, others bought Thrift Stamps and War Savings Stamps. During one 1918 campaign, teams competed to raise money between Abraham Lincoln's and George Washington's birthdays.

Both types of stamps helped fund the military during the war.

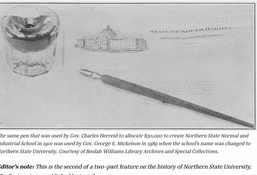
World War II brought another disruption. Male enrollment declined as students left for military service, while military-training programs brought servicemen to campus. Homecoming celebrations were adjusted and dedicated to students and alumni serving in the war.

Eventually, homecoming celebrations returned to form with long parades and other festivities, though the parade was canceled in 2019 because of winter weather and there was no parade or football game in 2020 as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year, a series of events, including some this week, is planned in observance of Northern's 125th birthday.

Northern State at 125: A normal and industrial school becomes a university

By Jason Lopez Martinez September 30, 2026 in Education, Featured, History, News Reading Time: 7 minutes



The same pen that was used by Gov. Charles Herreid to allocate $50,000 to create Northern State Normal and Industrial School in 1901 was used by Gov. George S. Mickelson in 1985 when the school's name was changed to Northern State University. Courtesy of Beulah Williams Library Archives and Special Collections.

Editor's note: *This is the second of a two-part feature on the history of Northern State University. The first part was published last week.*

As Northern State University has evolved during its 125-year history, almost everything has changed.

Even the school's name.

For decades, Northern's primary focus was to educate teachers, but that expanded as the years passed and more courses, programs and majors were added.

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Northern Normal and Industrial School became Northern State Teachers College and then, in 1964, Northern State College.

MORE: Northern State has survived fires, wars, evolving mission since its creation in 1901

By the 1980s, another name was being considered, according to the book "Northern State University: The First Century 1901-2000" by Mark Bartusis. The former NSU history professor's account provides a comprehensive history of the school's first century and was used as a source for much of this story.

Supporters wanted Northern State College to become Northern State University. They argued the word university better reflected what the school had become and carried greater recognition outside South Dakota.

Gov. Charles N. Herreid, the fourth governor of South Dakota, signed a bill allocating $50,000 to create Northern Normal and Industrial School in Aberdeen in 1901. Courtesy photo.

Opponents worried about the cost, possible redundancies and what the change might mean for the state's regental system.

After years of debate, lawmakers approved the new name in 1985.

In signing off on the change, Gov. George S. Mickelson used the same pen Gov. Charles Herreid used when he allocated $50,000 to create Northern in 1901.

Two years later, the old pen was traveling through space.

Northern alum and NASA astronaut Charles "Sam" Gemar contacted the university before his 1991 mission aboard Space Shuttle Discovery and asked whether the school had something it wanted him to carry during his journey. President Terence Brown chose the pen Herreid and Mickelson had used for the out-of-this-world adventure.

Back on Earth, Northern kept changing and drawing more than just students from far-flung places.

Marmorstein has spent 57 years watching changes at Northern

Art Marmorstein didn't expect to spend much of his life in Aberdeen.

He had grown up in northern California, attended Stanford University, got his master's at Sacramento State and earned his doctorate from the University of California, Davis.

While finishing graduate school, he spotted an advertisement in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*s

"Ancient history, Northern State University, Aberdeen, South Dakota."

Marmorstein had never heard of Northern State or Aberdeen.

He applied anyway, mostly, he said, because wanted practice interviewing for academic jobs before he got serious about finding the right gig.

When Northern offered him the position, Marmorstein figured he'd stay a year or two.

The professor of history is now in his 57th year on campus, the longest-tenured faculty member.



Art Marmorstein was one of two people named 2024 outstanding faculty members at Northern State University. Aberdeen Insider photo by Scott Hultman.

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"We fell in love with Aberdeen," Marmorstein said. "Fell in love with Northern State University."

Nearly four decades is long enough to watch pieces of a university disappear.

Marmorstein remembers when Northern students had to take physical education courses. Coaches taught some of them. There was even a bowling alley inside the student union, near where the campus post office is today.

MORE: Northern State University's fall enrollment up 4% as number of incoming freshmen jumps by 98%

"We had a bowling alley on campus. That's something that might surprise [people today]," he said.

Programs have disappeared, too.

Northern once had an industrial technology program that prepared students for engineering and produced shop teachers for schools across South Dakota. Marmorstein remembers its graduates getting jobs that sometimes paid more than their professors earned.

Now the program is gone, as is the school's theater major.

"Some programs have disappeared," Marmorstein said. "On the other hand, we have certain programs that are much, much bigger."

People have left campus, too, obviously, though one such person has since returned to lead the university.

Alan LaFave is the 19th permanent president at Northern State University, but he was a member of the marching band while he was a student before he graduated in 1985. Photo courtesy of Northern State University.

There was an installation ceremony for NSU President Alan LaFave last week. The Ozala native graduated from Northern State and worked on campus for 30 years before returning in January to become the school's 19th permanent president.

Colleagues who spent decades teaching beside Marmorstein have also retired or moved on. Students he taught as freshmen have become teachers themselves. Some eventually return to Northern as professors.

One of Marmorstein's former students became a teacher at Aberdeen Central. He said he didn't realize it until he walked into a parent-teacher conference and discovered she was teaching his son.

That's one reason Marmorstein thinks Northern has remained recognizable despite all of the changes. Teachers wind up teaching future teachers.

"They're teachers of your own kids. They're teachers of your own grandkids," he said.

Northern opened what was called a Governor's Electronic Classroom in Mewaldt-Jensen Hall in 1998. It was loaded with the top technology of the time — 10 computer workstations, three TVs and two projection screens. It's now called the Center for Statewide E-Learning, providing high school classes for 3,000 students across the state.

NSUtv arrived that April and remains today.

In 1999, Northern introduced "paperless" grades, and students could get their grades by phone.

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There was a time when sheets of paper with grades were taped to the wall for anybody to see. It was suboptimal at the time and certainly wouldn't fly nowadays.

For Marmorstein, the more striking changes aren't always technological.

When he arrived, Northern's secondary education program was considerably larger. He remembers leading a social studies methods class with 22 students hoping to teach history and social studies themselves.

Now, he said, there might be three or four graduates a year in the field.

Campus investments add up

But, Marmorstein has also watched new programs emerge that didn't exist when he got to campus. The same goes for buildings.

Old residence halls and other structures were razed and new ones went up. The amount of construction on campus in the past 15 years has been profound.

Bucortah Bank Stadium opened at Northern State University in 2021, giving the Wolves the chance to play football games on campus for the first time. Photo courtesy of Northern State University.

A new science center on the northeast corner of campus opened in 2019. The next year, a new South Dakota School for the Blind and Visually Impaired opened on the land along South State Street that was once home to the beloved Jerde Hall. In 2021, Dacotah Bank Stadium was christened, providing the Wolves a place to play football games on campus for the first time. More recently, Gerber Hall, long associated with Northern's teacher-training mission, underwent a major renovation.

And that's to say nothing of improvements and additions to the Barnett Center, a revamp of the Johnson Fine Arts Center, an on-campus softball field and a soccer pavilion and field.

Lincoln and Briscoe Halls were torn down and replaced with the $30 million Business and Health Innovation Center, which opened to nursing and business students earlier this year.

All of the upgrades dating back to 2011 have netted an investment of roughly $120 million on campus, the vast majority of which was privately raised.

Evolving through time

Northern's nursing program began after another Aberdeen institution disappeared.

When Presentation College closed, Northern moved to address a shortage of nurses in South Dakota by adding a bachelor of science degree. The first cohort of nursing students started in 2015.

Aberdeen spent years fighting for a place to offer postsecondary education. Now, it's hard to imagine the community without the campus.

MORE: Past meets present: Lincoln Hall history preserved with Business and Health Innovation Center conference table

And there was good news earlier this month when the school announced enrollment is up 4% to 3,890 students compared to fall 2025. A freshman class of 983 is 18% higher than a year ago.

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Northern's enrollment is at an all-time high, though that's also the result of change. It includes 1,455 high school students who take dual-credit classes that give them both high school and college credits at a reduced tuition rate.

People trump progress

For all of the new buildings and advances in technology, that's not what Marmorstein talks about when discussing why he's remained in Aberdeen.

He talks about the people.

Marmorstein and his wife Donna have six grown children. They've all taken classes at NSU and three have graduated from the school, while one of their granddaughters is a freshman.

Marmorstein

Art Marmorstein said he still visits with students he taught when he first started at Northern. And he still notices something about Aberdeen that struck him after arriving from California. The line separating the university and community is hard to find.

"All over town, you're going to see people wearing their Northern gear. There is something special about that town and gown relationship," he said.

MORE: Northern's Center for Statewide E-learning at maximum capacity with 3,000 students

Today's campus would have been tough to imagine even 50 years ago, much less when the founders established the school in 1901.

But they might recognize the pen, which is perhaps why it remains.

An exhibit is now open at the Beulah Williams Library on campus that highlights the different eras at Northern through images, film and artifacts. And the library has a comprehensive online archive at nsudigital.org/digital-collections/.

Northern has spent 125 years evolving from a small school on a plot of prairie land to an integral part of Aberdeen and northeastern South Dakota.

The little normal school didn't survive by just doing the same thing for which it was created. It survived by remaining useful to the people it serves.