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## Heritage 2014

# The Mission Lives On

BY KELLY HERTZ  
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When I was a kid, I often heard that, back in the 19th century, Sioux Falls was given the choice between having a state (or territorial) university or having a prison. The city opted for the latter, probably for economic reasons. (This tale, if true, might arguably explain how this state sets its educational priorities today.)

But this story, if there is anything to it, is actually quite one-dimensional, and it does overlook the importance that was placed on the process of education back in those early days of white settlement.

To appreciate that, I need look no farther than a few miles south of my hometown of Menno. Just off a gravel road that hugs the James River, there sits in a clearing a wooden sign that commemorates a one-room schoolhouse called Norway School, which was founded in 1873 and closed for good in 1964. The school's long gone now (in fact, it wound up on my family's farm just a couple of miles away, where it served as a garage, machine shed and wasp magnet for another couple decades), but the sign is there and the memory is duly commemorated.

More importantly, the mission that was conceived back in 1873 on what was then a vast, unsettled and harsh frontier is as fresh and as vital now as ever.

Educating children is a staple in every society, and it remains strong in ours. Yes, we still have a lot of debate about how to go about funding this process and making it work for everyone involved, but no one disputes the importance of this very important function.

They must have understood that quite well in 1873, when the Norway school was built. There was certainly a lot of work for the settlers of that time to do to carve lives for themselves out of this prairie. Basic survival was a pressing issue, one that was magnified by every mile away you resided from regional river hubs like Yankton. The children of those settlers weren't just offspring: They were a source of labor, and they were particularly susceptible to the harsh summers and brutal winters that could visit these places. (There's a terrible reason why the great Blizzard of 1888 is called "the Children's Blizzard.") And yet, making sure these kids knew how to read and write, how to decipher arithmetic problems was important, too. That's why there was a Norway school — and a lot of other schools like it scattered across the prairie.

The *Press & Dakotan's* "Heritage" edition this year takes a look at the topic of education, which — we soon realized — is deep and wide. It was so unwieldy, in fact, that it took quite a bit of time to pare it down with some form of focus. And even this was a difficult chore.

We eventually decided on a basic theme of "Past, Present and Future," which really fits this topic better than most. After all, education is al-



KELLY HERTZ/P&D

This sign, posted along the James River in northern Yankton County south of Menno, commemorates the former Norway country school, one of many one-room rural schoolhouses that sprouted across the prairie in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These schoolhouses were essential hubs of education in rural locales, nurturing a mission of building for the future which is as relevant today as it was when the Norway school opened in 1873.

ways about the future, whether that future is six months from now or a decade from now. And the present is always determined by the past, which shows us how we got here and why we do what we do.

We cover a lot of ground in the four sections we present today, but there was also a lot of ground left uncovered. But we do hope we give you a good overview of this very dynamic topic.

Education today is in the throes of extraordinary change. We're seeing computer tablets deployed at an increasing rate; we're seeing distance learning giving students in your town once-unimaginable windows on the world. A new generation of eager minds is soaking up a new generation of technological advances in preparation for the changes that will no doubt come, many times over, in the years ahead.

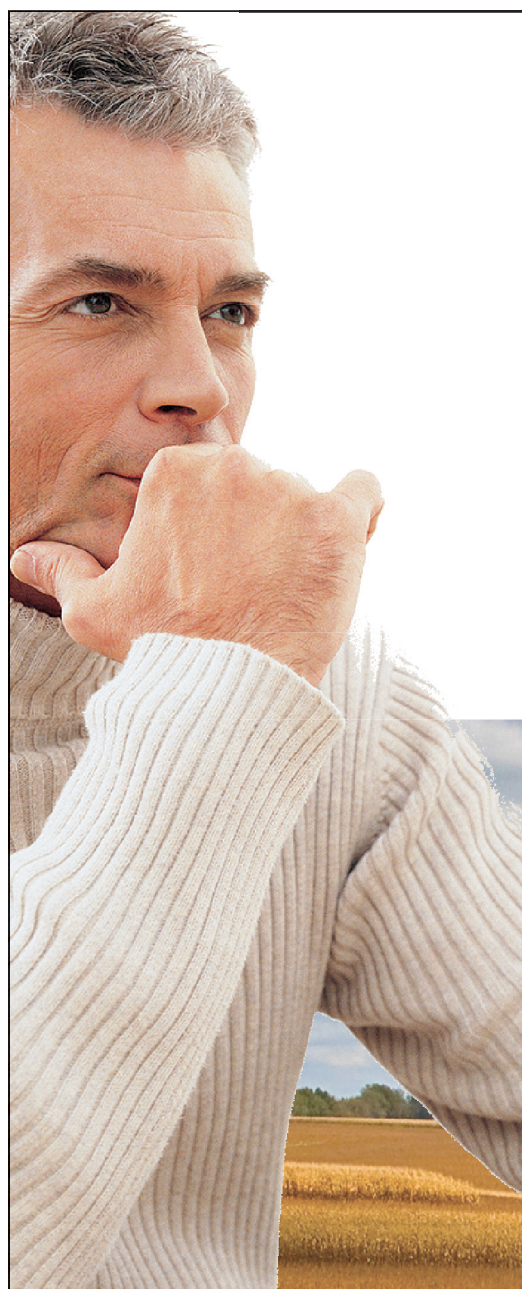
And we are also seeing great challenges, rang-

ing from dwindling enrollments to funding headaches and low teacher pay. How we address these issues today will do much to dictate the quality of education that we offer in the future. The ball is in our court now.

The mission remains the same: We are still preparing kids for the future. It was true at the old Norway school, and the same truth greeted kids when they walked through the doorways this fall in Yankton, Vermillion, Crofton, Wagner, Wynot ... at any place where young minds are trained for tomorrow.

The mission, it seems, is universal and eternal, and we can all be thankful for that.

You can follow Kelly Hertz on Twitter at [twitter.com/kelly\\_hertz/](https://twitter.com/kelly_hertz/). Discuss this story at [www.yankton.net/](http://www.yankton.net/).



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