

USD-Springfield

The Pointer Spirit Survives

Springfield's Memories Of Its Tough Little College Remain Bittersweet

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John McNeill came to Springfield in the early 1970s, expecting to teach humanities and communications courses at the small, state-supported college. He found much, much more.

McNeill and his wife, Susan, discovered a very vibrant, tight-knit and caring college and community.

"There was a real close connection between the kids who came to the school and the townspeople," he said. "It was a real happy relationship, and (my wife and I) still hear about it."

The college, founded in 1881, went through a number of name changes, the last one as University of South Dakota-Springfield. The school started primarily as a teacher's college but later added vocational courses and degrees.

The college always fought for its existence, both financially and politically, McNeill said. However, its students, faculty, alumni and others remained staunch supporters.

Despite valiant efforts to keep it open, the college closed in 1984. The campus was later converted to its current usage as a medium-security prison for the South Dakota Department of Corrections (DOC). The prison currently houses around 1,200 inmates.

At its peak, the Springfield college enrolled around 1,200 students, McNeill said. The school enrolled around 800 students when it closed.

McNeill wrote a book chronicling the school's history. He incorporated information from the *Press & Dakotan* and the *Springfield Times*, the respective oldest daily and weekly newspapers in the Dakotas.

When he found the microfiche unusable, McNeill spent two years reading every single copy of the *Times* dating back to 1868. He found a rich history of the college and community.

"In the earlier days of Springfield, the town was on the railroad line out of Yankton. And with it being on the river, there was potential for Springfield," he said. "It could have become (another) Yankton, but that didn't happen. There were a lot of political things. Springfield at one time was promised the state penitentiary, but it went to Sioux Falls. The land office went to Tyndall. Springfield didn't end up with anything, and they feared just becoming a bump in the road."

Springfield residents took matters into their own hands, McNeill said.

"The city fathers were a fairly sophisticated group for a little town. George Snow became lieutenant governor of South Dakota," he said. "They platted out Springfield, and several others decided they would get a school here. The state didn't provide funds for it, so there was a drive among the people for subscriptions. They were taking money to build their own Springfield Normal."

The school was created and nurtured at first mostly with local support, McNeill said.

"They were promised state help," he said. "Finally, the state helped Springfield with the college."

Even so, Springfield faced many challenges as a smaller school in a smaller community, tucked in the southeast part of the state, McNeill said.

"For the life of the school, Springfield never had an easy year," he said. "There was huge competition from Vermillion, Brookings, Aberdeen and Madison. Those schools got the most consideration and funding, and Springfield had to struggle to stay alive."



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D
Jon Westling holds a banner for the now-closed Springfield college in this file photo taken at the Springfield College Museum. Westling attended the Springfield school, then returned as a professor and coach. The school, whose name changed throughout its history, opened in 1881, and it closed in 1984 as the University of South Dakota-Springfield. The college reached a peak enrollment of around 1,200 students and faced many battles during its existence. The campus now serves as a medium-security prison.

The Springfield college supporters, including those from Yankton, constantly battled to save the school. However, the political winds shifted for good when then-Gov. Bill Janklow and the Legislature closed the college.

"The people of Springfield were tenacious, but they couldn't struggle anymore," McNeill said. "There were a number of factors, such as a bulging prison population and a governor who thought seven state schools were too many. It just couldn't stay open any longer."

With its emphasis on teacher training, Springfield provided a crucial pipeline for South Dakota's schools, McNeill said.

"If it wasn't for the teachers who came out of places like Springfield and Northern State (in Aberdeen), you wouldn't have had all those teachers in the (state's K-12) schools," he said.

CLOSE TIES

The college's closing remains disappointing and even painful for many. However, the school's memories remain alive through its alumni association and the Springfield College Museum on the community's Main Street.

About a decade ago, Janklow donated a 1,200-square-foot building, similar to ones used as daycare facilities, to be used as the Springfield College Museum. The museum houses the school's archives and memorabilia.

The land belongs to Tom Monfore, a Springfield native who wasn't a college alumnus but who offered the site as a show of support. The college museum stands next to the Springfield Historical Society Museum.

Jon Westling has been active in maintaining the museum. Now living in Yankton, he attended the Springfield college and returned as a professor and coach.

In a previous interview, Westling told the *Press & Dakotan* he found a strong bond between town and gown.

"The college personnel and students were active participants in the community," he said. "It was a unique atmosphere. It was a good marriage between the college and the community. It made Springfield a pleasant place to live."

Under the requirements at the time, a number of students could finish a summer session or one year of college and teach in a rural school, Westling said. Several of those students eventually returned and earned a four-year degree, he said.

"For a number of years, the college students did all their practice teaching at Springfield because they didn't have cars," he said. "In the later years, they would go out to other schools to student teach."

The college's ties to the region

began with the make-up of the student body itself, McNeill said. He estimated 90 percent of the student body came from south-central and south-east South Dakota.

In particular, the college and its rural setting also appealed to West River students, he said.

"Springfield really served people who lived in communities like Colome, White River, Bonesteel and Fairfax. These are people who otherwise would never have gone on to further their education after high school," he said.

"These people thought of Springfield as their local college, even if they drove 200 miles to get here. There are a lot of people who, if it wasn't for this college, wouldn't have become teachers."

Many northeast Nebraska students faced more of a challenge reaching school, even though Springfield lay just across the Missouri River. The bridge didn't yet exist between Running Water and Niobrara, Neb., so those students would cross the bridge at Yankton or Pickstown.

"Or they could use the ferry (at Running Water). But they couldn't use it at night, winter, if the water was real fast or real low, or if the banks were badly eroded," McNeill said.

"It depended which side the ferry was on. If you were on the opposite side, you would run up the flag so Captain Mickey knew he needed to cross the river and get you. But later they had CB radios or they would blow the horns."

MAKING SACRIFICES

Farm families strongly desired a college education for their children and paid for it any way possible, McNeill said. Those families turned to creative means during difficult financial times.

"Springfield was a very rural institution of higher learning for very rural people. People came to the school in the earlier years and paid for tuition with a box of eggs," he said.

"A mother and father brought their child in an old chugging car or pickup, and they went up to the administration building to get their son or daughter enrolled and paid for the semester with produce.

"Years ago, a side of beef and two boxes of honey were set up (as payment). If you didn't have greenbacks, you paid for it with fatback."

The acceptance of meat and produce wasn't an act of charity, as it filled a very real need for the college, McNeill said.

"They took the produce over to Summit Hall," he said. "I suspect it went straight to the dining hall and fed those students. Otherwise, somebody had to purchase food."

McNeill strongly disputed any notion that the Springfield college offered a lesser quality of education because of its size or location.

"Springfield wasn't a place for people who couldn't make it other places. It was a place where they could come and feel comfortable enough to know they could make it here," he said.

"It wasn't because they couldn't make it academically. They were just from fairly small schools and little farm towns, and these people came from farm families. They fit in beautifully at Springfield, and the school had tremendous teachers."

The late Virgil Petrik was one of those outstanding teachers, McNeill said.

Petrik, a Tabor native, graduated from the Springfield college and excelled in forensics and drama. He became student body president. After earning his master's degree, Petrik returned to Springfield and led the college's humanities department.

"Virgil's wife, Alice, has been keeping the alumni association and museum going," McNeill said. "She and a number of others are working with it because they don't want to see the torch extinguished."

CAMPUS FUN

Athletics offered a rallying point and enjoyment for the students, alumni and area residents. The Springfield teams competed in the South Dakota Intercollegiate Conference (SDIC).

One of Westling's favorite museum exhibits is a large button of the Pointer mascot. Some of his fondest memories are the Founder's Day homecoming celebrations from 1954-84.

"Homecoming was a huge day. There was a huge parade and celebrations, then you had the big afternoon football game," he said. "The town was so full of people. You walked because you couldn't find a place to drive. A large number of alumni came back for homecoming. It was the most exciting day for me."

Springfield enjoyed spirited rivalries with neighboring schools, including Yankton College. The YC mascot was the greyhound, leading to a unique "traveling trophy."

"With them as the Greyhounds and us as the Pointers, we had the Doghouse Series," McNeill said with a chuckle. "There was always a great effort for them to steal our doghouse. It was all college frivolity and good nature. It was a lot of fun and laughs."

While college life had its lighter moments, the Springfield campus was also influenced by world events, McNeill said.

"At one point during World War II, there were probably only a half-dozen men on campus," he said. "We had a

lot of women becoming teachers, but the men were in the service and overseas."

War again affected the campus when the Vietnam conflict drew many men into combat, McNeill said. However, Springfield saw an influx of older students when veterans attended college after the war.

"Springfield was perfect for this kind of person," he said. "It was a place where people seemed to be really welcoming, not only for the traditional students but for the non-traditional students."

The college itself began to change in nature, particularly its programs, McNeill said. The school shifted from primarily teacher training to the addition of technical programs. A number of the technical graduates worked in area manufacturing plants and other businesses.

"At the time the school was closed, the country was crying for technical training like auto mechanics and diesel," he said. "Now, it's something South Dakota is crying for. We closed programs that could have produced an incredible amount of people."

FACING THE END

Rumors swirled around campus in 1983 that an effort would be made to close the campus. Students and staff tried to conduct business as usual, but the school year was filled with rallies and lobbying the Legislature.

The school appeared safe during the 1984 legislative session, but the issue was revived and Springfield was closed as a college. Unsuccessful efforts to sell the college resulted in its conversion to a prison.

In a previous *Press & Dakotan* interview, McNeill said the campus — led by the college dean, Dr. Tom Stone — resolved to make the college its best right up to the end.

"(Stone) wouldn't let us sink into pity," McNeill said. "He was upbeat and cheerful and never let us get down. He saw to it that we were functioning right up to the last day."

McNeill recalled the feeling at the final commencement May 12, 1984.

"It was sobering," he said. "You had not only congratulations but also goodbye. There was faculty you would never see again."

After a time working at Southeast Vo-Tech in Sioux Falls, McNeill returned to Springfield and worked with the adult education program at the prison. During that time, he saw many inmates turn around their lives through vocational programs, earning their GED and completing chemical dependency programs.

In that respect, Springfield was no longer a college but was still making an impact on people's lives, McNeill said.

"We had inmates who had meaningful and important experiences," he said. "Every day, I seemed to have contact with a former inmate who told me the impact that the prison programs had on turning around his life."

Now retired from education, McNeill pastors a Springfield church. In addition, he and his wife remain active musicians and perform at a number of area functions. Those occasions bring him in contact with Springfield college alumni.

"We seem to be playing a lot of engagements in assisted living centers and nursing homes, and very frequently it comes up that someone there graduated from Southern Normal (one of the school's names)," he said. "They would say they graduated in 1951, and while they were students, they stayed in this little upstairs room in a house for three years. There are those kinds of fond memories."

In the College Memorial Park, a large marker remembers those who touched the lives of countless students and faculty.

"Erected in appreciation for providing education for over 50,000 students, By students, faculty and friends 1986," the printing on the stone says in the corner of the park.

The Springfield college may be gone, but its history and impact aren't forgotten, McNeill said.

"It was a great 100 years," he said.

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