

Archival Minute

August 2010

100 YEARS AGO—THE LAST NEBRASKA NORMAL COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT

The summer of 1910 was a time of transition on campus as the Nebraska Normal College (NNC) founded by James M. Pile in 1891 graduated its last class and preparations were being made for the State to assume control following purchase of the NNC from the Pile family the year before.

In its August 4, 1910 issue, *The Wayne Herald* commented on the accomplishments of Pile and the NNC:

“J.M. Pile, the founder, built a school upon a solid foundation, and since his death [March 11, 1909] his son, Fred M. Pile, has conducted it along the same general lines of excellence. That the school has been a success is fully attested by the attendance year after year and the hundreds who have gone out from its portals into the broader avenues of active life, well fitted to take up the duties that come to them in different spheres.”



*Nebraska Normal College
Wayne, Nebraska*

The commencement exercises were conducted over several days, which was typical at that time. On the evening of August 4 there was a contest between the two literary societies, the Crescents and the Philomathean. A literary society had been established in the early days of the NNC in response to President Pile’s belief that “a teacher should not only secure a fund of book knowledge but should be able to stand up and express himself [or herself] before an audience—to impart knowledge is the work of the teacher.” [Nan Whitmore, *Nebraska Normal College*, 1939]. Whitmore notes “The literary programs, Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A., and Saturday night socials were the accepted means of social contact.”

In 1895 the literary society had become so large that it was divided into the two societies with their respective elected officers, meetings, socials and programs. According to Whitmore, there existed a “good

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natured rivalry” between the two as they regularly staged competitive programs consisting of orations, debates, readings, plays, and musical productions. That night the Philomatheans won in the categories of Recitation (Emma Anderson of O’Neill) and Oration (Lottie Johnson of Norfolk) while the Crescents took prizes for Essay (Emma Martiny of Winside) and Debate (M. Edna Baluss of Atkinson). The debate topic was: Resolved: That Inheritance Has More to do with What We Are Than Environment. Baluss took the affirmative.

The next night the Department of Elocution presented the play, “A Cheerful Liar,” at the Opera House in downtown Wayne. *The Wayne Herald* reported that there was “a good-sized and appreciative audience.”

The “Jones Prize” Oration contest took place the evening of August 6. Orations were given in groups of two or three with musical interludes. The judges proclaimed a tie between Bess Etter of Niobrara and Elsie Myer of Belden. They shared in the \$20 prize (the equivalent of almost \$500 today).

F. H. Jones, owner of the Wayne Book Store had established a “Jones Prize” in 1907 (Jones and several other Wayne business owners established prizes for students who excelled in various areas). According to the January 3, 1907 *Wayne Herald*, the Jones Prize was to be “awarded to the student of the Music Department who makes ‘The Most Substantial Improvement’ in music studies, in department, in general improvement.” It’s unclear why prize to be awarded to a student of music was awarded to the winner of an oration contest. Perhaps Jones awarded a second prize or changed the requirements.

There was a baccalaureate service the afternoon of Sunday, August 7 at Chapel Hall. The sermon, “The Abundant Life,” was delivered by Rev. Alexander Corkey, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, “whose effort,” *The Wayne Herald* reported, “was made very appropriate and was listened to with strict attention.” The paper added, “The singing was excellent.”

The evening of the August 7 the Y. W. C. A., the Y. M. C. A. and the Catholic Club held a “conjoint” program consisting of hymns, a piece for orchestra, a piano solo, prayer, and addresses by Minnie E. Goodsell, C. R. Chinn, and Margaret A. Carroll, representing the Y. W. C. A., the Y. M. C. A. and the Catholic Club, respectively.

The next night “The Mines Prize” recitation contest was held by the Department of Expression. The prize, a special medal, was given by J. G. Mines, Wayne jeweler, “to the student who ranks first in the Elocution [Expression] Department in study, in department, in general improvement and gives ‘The Best Recitation.’” M. F. Weittenhiller of Hartington was judged the winner.

The “Craven Prize” Debate Contest took place the evening of Tuesday, August 9. C. M. Craven, a Wayne photographer, offered a prize of \$20 to “the member of the graduating classes [sic] who prepares and delivers ‘The Best Debate’ on some live question pertaining to our government.” That night the debate topic was, “Resolved: That the Policy of Maintaining the United States Navy at Its Present Strength is Preferable to the Policy of Substantially Increasing It.” Thomas N. Jenkins, who argued the negative, won.

Wednesday evening, August 10, came the awarding of diplomas. *The Wayne Herald* gave this account:

The address was given by Robt. I. Elliott, a former student, and now superintendent of the Broken Bow schools. Fred Pile presented the diplomas, and included in his speech words of farewell to the institution which his father founded and with which the members of the Pile family have long been associated. The program closed with the singing of the college song, written by John Neihardt and put to music by Miss Nellie Stewart.”

The multi-day celebration wasn't over yet, however. An alumni reunion was held the next day, August 11. Class reunions started at 11:00. The alumni were then guests of President Pile and Mrs. Pile for lunch at noon. The afternoon was time for recreation. Alumni participated in a basket ball [sic] game at 1:30 and a base ball [sic] game at 3:00. The day ended with tennis at 4:00.

The Nebraska Normal College had come to an end, but would live on in the memory of many. As *The Wayne Herald* observed:

Thousands of men and women everywhere will always hold in grateful remembrance J. M. Pile, the founder of the school, and the good work under his direction that their alma mater did for them in fitting them more fully to life's work.”

The college re-opened Monday, September 19, as the State Normal College at Wayne. However, the transition from private to state control was not a total break with the past. As State Normal President U. S. Conn stated in an April 12, 1911 letter sent out to NNC alumni: “It is the desire of the new school to keep in touch with the members of the alumni of the Nebraska Normal College, and we want each of you to regard the State Normal School at Wayne as your Alma Mater.”

1891 N. N. C. 1910

THE
FACULTY AND CLASSES
OF
NINETEEN HUNDRED TEN
OF THE
NEBRASKA NORMAL COLLEGE
DESIRE YOUR PRESENCE
AT THEIR
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
TO BE HELD AT THE
COLLEGE CHAPEL
AUGUST 4 TO AUGUST 11
WAYNE, NEBRASKA

*Cover and First Page of the
1910 Commencement Program*

Wayne State
College