

ON BECOMING A UNIVERSITY

Talk delivered by Clarence ("Soc") Glasrud at the ceremony
observing the name-change to Moorhead State University,
2:30 p.m., Friday, August 1, 1975

Our history as a college--as we usually look at it--seems bare: a kind of inevitable progression that matches very closely the American pattern of the past century.

We began 90 years ago as a State Normal School because the developing counties of Northern Minnesota needed teachers. Also because Solomon Comstock thought a State Normal School would be a fine thing for Moorhead, and Comstock had the political muscle and know-how to get the right bills through the legislature. This marks the first stage in the evolutionary process.

A third of a century later this nation decided that all of its young people should have high school educations. Automobiles and good roads and new high schools in all the small towns put the youth of Northern Minnesota into classrooms until they became 16--or 18, after World War I. The existing colleges and universities could not graduate enough teachers to staff these new high schools, and the normal schools were transformed into four-year, degree-granting State Teachers Colleges. The Minnesota legislature passed the necessary bills in 1921, but it took some years for the change to come about. In the late twenties, however, the first degrees were granted at Moorhead.

Their new status as colleges meant the hiring of academic specialists, and the new institutions entered the main stream of higher education. The Normal schools had already begun to develop extra-curricular activities. Now they became full-fledged colleges, often allowing a good deal of specialization. But they only granted education degrees.

The economic and population boom that followed the end of World War II propelled the Teachers Colleges into all-purpose institutions that offered non-teaching degrees. The "teachers" part of the name was dropped and most of the colleges grew enormously. They added graduate programs, took on research functions and sometimes assembled quite impressive faculties. As enrollments swelled and multitudinous programs developed at these institutions, state legislatures and governing boards began to change their names from colleges to universities. Today that designation has come to Moorhead State.

We fit the pattern. We are a common type, a garden-variety kind of college that began as a normal school, became a teachers college, then a state college, and now a state university. But this raises some questions: are we any good? can a college, now a university, that develops in such a way, be any good? And what is "good" in such an institution? Most important, just what can or

will make such a college or university truly distinctive, perhaps even distinguished? In other words, can we transcend the type or pattern? How can we be good, though common?

The answer is, through people: they always make the difference, the distinction. If Solomon Comstock had not been a very uncommon man the new normal school he secured for Moorhead in 1885 would have been located elsewhere. He was a strong, distinctive personality, though not universally admired, and Moorhead was a roaring, distinctive city, not universally admired. When its normal school opened, the town was 17 years old: it had seen two booms and two depressions, and was just beginning to revive again. The chief source of its new prosperity in the late 80's was a booming saloon business, after North Dakota came into the Union as a dry state. "Whiskey," says the biography of Livingston Lord, who came to Moorhead in the fall of 1888 to open the new Normal School, "Whiskey provided an interesting background for teacher training."

If our location made us distinctive, our people made us distinguished--at times at least; and no college is always distinguished, and in every way--not even Harvard. We were extraordinarily lucky in our first president. For that Connecticut Yankee who came to Minnesota in 1874 "had been a severe and outspoken critic of normal schools as they were generally conducted." Livingston Lord became the president of the new college at Moorhead because "he was tempted by the promising opportunity to embody his own ideas of scholarship in teacher."

Lord may have been the very best teacher of teachers in the nation. The testimony of friends and admirers like Cyrus Northrup and Nicholas Murray Butler suggest that he was, and Lotus D. Coffman was a protege. He stayed at Moorhead for 10 years and left a mark that has not been erased. When he left to open a new and larger college in Illinois, he took with him from Moorhead "the three best faculty members at the time in any normal school in the United States."

Livingston Lord's judgment on Ellen Ford, Paul Goode, and Henry Johnson was "not a guess, but verified," and he said. Their quality could not be matched, of course, and that impossibly high level of the first decade could not be maintained. But neither could their example be forgotten or our momentum dissipated. Moorhead continued to be a very good Normal School during President Frank Weld's 20 years of service.

And the students, beginning with Lord's first 29 in the fall of '88? They were an American cross-section, says Lord's biography, some Lincolns, and Chiltons, and McGonigles, but more Askegaards and Kjellness, and Ericksons. But were they the kind of people who could bring distinction to a college, which can never be any better than its people, its teachers and students? There indeed is the rub, for most of them came to our college out of economic necessity, and they still do. They come to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They are modest, though ambitious, hard working and unpretentious. Just here is the crux of our problem. We do not want to lose our commonness, nor this kind of student: but how do we persuade them that they underrate themselves and their potential, for they do, and they underrate their college for its unpretentious availability to people like them.