

Class of 1916 gift marks a time in country's history

By Karen Martinez
The Hutchinson News

NICKERSON - The Reno County High School class of 1916 wanted to give a gift to the school.

They chose a statue of Abraham Lincoln.

Why?

"Because we were so patriotic at the time," said 100-year-old lifetime Nickerson resident Gladys Lauer and a member of the class of 1916. "That was 1916. The world war was on and all of us were afraid, sad and scared because our friends were going to go to war. It was the best thing we could do to show our emotion. So we all chipped in money to buy the statue."

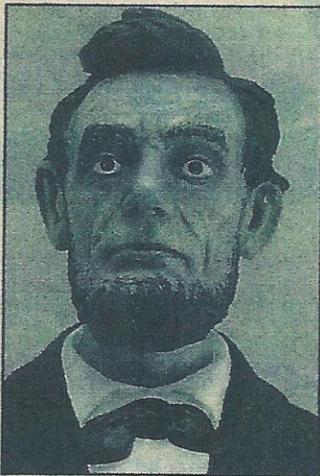
Standing seven feet in height and made of plaster of Paris on steel rods, the former president in all his glory - dressed in the outfit he wore when he gave the Gettysburg address - has been a permanent fixture at the school now known as Nickerson High School.

For 81 years the Lincoln statue has been located at various places in the school - sometimes revered and at times abused.

"I do know at one point in time he would get moved around. He would end up someplace else in the building - in the hall or classes," said Gary Graber, Nickerson High School principal. "There have been comments made by various alumni - things like putting paper on him or he would have hat on. I think at one time he had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth."

But, through it all, the Lincoln statue has survived. A 300-pound base of concrete keeps Lincoln from being moved too far from its home.

Originally white in color, the statue has undergone some restoration, thanks to the research and artistic abilities of teachers and students.



In 1996, restoring the statue became a school project initiated by several members of the girls' flag corps, Graber said.

The school's art instructor, Joel Garret, became involved in the project and had his students research Lincoln's attire to restore it as authentically as possible. The school's industrial arts department got involved in the restoration as well.

Lincoln's coat and pants were painted brown, his bow tie and boots black and his shirt white. His facial features were given an authentic touch with brown

eyes and realistic skin tones. In Lincoln's right hand he holds a rolled up scroll of the Gettysburg address.

"It turned out better than their wildest dreams," Graber said.

The statue was officially dedicated at last year's NHS alumni banquet.

Last Saturday, at this year's alumni banquet, Graber took about 30 curious alumni on a tour to see the statue,

which stands proudly in the corner of the school's conference room.

Lincoln gives visitors a chance to reflect on the school's past and the life of the great former president.

"I'm awful glad they took care of it," Lauer said. "He (Lincoln) was revered as a wonderful person and still is today."

Lauer, a Nickerson sixth-grade teacher for 39 of the 45 years she taught, would like to pass on her own message to students.

"Tell them to revere the life of Abraham Lincoln and try to live up to his principles," Lauer said. "It represents the times of our lives - war and all that. A lot of families were torn apart when their dear ones had to go to World War I."

Lauer credits an energetic class president - Bruce Fleming, a former banker at Nickerson - for engineering the purchase of the statue 81 years ago.

"That was the first time we had war in our lives," Lauer said. "The best thing they could think of was to honor Abraham Lincoln at the time."

Reno County High School was one of the first high schools in Reno County. Students from



Karen Martinez/The Hutchinson News

A statue of Abraham Lincoln stands in the conference room of Nickerson High School.

rural areas were sent to live in Nickerson homes to attend the school, Lauer said.

The high school was known as Reno County High School from 1903 to 1924, Reno Community High School from 1924 to 1955, Nickerson Rural High School from 1955 to 1966 and in 1966 the name was changed to Nickerson High School and Unified school district 309 was established. A fire, construction and additions have been a part of the school's lengthy history.

The statue may have seemed to watch over the students and the school's changes in its 81 years.

But, a mystery remains.

"No one knew for sure where it (Lincoln) came from," Graber said.

Lauer said the students of 1916 looked at Abraham Lincoln as an uplifting spiritual leader.

"That was our gift to the school," Lauer said. "We were all real close to one another as students. The attitude was so different then. Those were wonderful days."