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**Pictures from the past record
our history, counting down
the years to the centennial,
1917 – 2017.**

Politics in Alaska can be as fleeting as a snow sculpture in April. This rendition of Uncle Sam, created on the Fairbanks campus in 1976 to celebrate our nation's bicentennial, shows a patriotic — if cheeky — spirit, alive and well in the Far North. Read about how politics led several Alaskans to the political quagmire of Washington, D.C., and how they cope, starting on page 14.

Morrill Act was the birth marker of UAF

Story by Nancy Tarnai. Photos courtesy of the Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

A federal act passed in 1862 affected the education of the U.S. population more than anything in history.

“It’s a great thing,” UAF history Professor Terrence Cole says. “It’s amazing how the land grant colleges vastly expanded higher education for citizens. It revolutionized American higher education.”

Before the Morrill Act, colleges focused on the liberal arts and classical studies of Latin and Greek. This medieval model, as Cole calls it, was all the country had until the 1860s. “At the time, people thought the summit of intellectual achievement was to learn Latin and Greek,” Cole says.

The colleges were private and expensive, and admissions policies tended to be exclusive, all of which combined to put higher education largely out of reach of all but a privileged minority.

The Morrill Act gave states land, which they were supposed to lease, sell or use to establish and support institutions for the education of agriculture, military tactics and the “mechanic arts,” which can be loosely defined as engineering.

“The act created a new branch of education that would involve the liberal arts but also agriculture and mechanical arts,” Cole says. In the 1860s the U.S. was overwhelmingly an agricultural country, hence the focus on agriculture at land grant institutions, he explains.



Above: Celebrants gather for Dedication Day at the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines on Sept. 13, 1922, five days before classes began at the land grant college.

Below: With guests and faculty seated on a platform in front of Main Building, the crowd stood in a hayfield to celebrate Dedication Day.

While the act was passed in 1862 it would be 1915 before an institution of higher education would be conceived of in Fairbanks. Alaska’s delegate to Congress, James Wickersham, advocated for approval of a land grant for an Alaska college. Alaska Territorial Gov. John Strong signed the bill in 1917 to establish and pay for Alaska’s land grant institution. By 1922, Fairbanks was home to the Agricultural College and School of Mines, known today as UAF.

Pointing out how Alaska is different from the other 49 states with land grant institutions, Cole calls UAF “the land grant college without much land.” Alaska never got all the land it was intended to have because back then the land hadn’t been surveyed.

The land Alaska received was initially called the Tanana Valley Land Grant. The acreage came to 9,000 instead of the intended 250,000 that had been authorized.

“Instead the state became responsible for financial support of the university in other ways,” Cole says.

Would Alaska have a university if not for the land grant?

“We’d probably have some sort of university, but it wouldn’t have higher education at the level and quality we have,” he says. He notes that before the establishment of what is now UAF, Alaska had the Alaska Methodist University (now Alaska Pacific University), a private, liberal arts school in Anchorage.

The Fairbanks Experiment Farm was established in 1906, so it made sense for the new college to be located nearby. “The college was created around the farm,” Cole says. “The university is here because of the farm.”

As for the land grant in general, Cole laments the fact that most people don’t understand it or care about it, but he believes it made sweeping changes in this country.

“People don’t realize how amazing it is,” he says. “We assume now that everyone has the opportunity to go to college if they want to.”

