

A Celebration of the Northlands/Elkader 12 Conference Era, 1985 to 1996  
Not because Anyone is Lost in the Past but  
because so Much was Launched from that Past



**The Beginning in Elkader.** Storytellers from five states and then some came annually to attend the Northlands' formal conference events and to begin or renew and strengthen personal and professional ties. Storytelling permeated the community and the school system during the Conference. Schools, churches, care centers, plus the library, park, and bar were filled with telling.

The formal work of organization, administration, and teaching/learning for the attendees took place primarily at the Opera House and in Peace Church.

The storytelling community-building took place all day and all night around the conference and on the journeys there and back home again.

**What brought Northlands there and kept Northlands there for 12 conferences?**

**Performance space?** An Opera House known for excellence in acoustics, in the National Register of Historic Places, beautifully restored, seating 700 and complete with lights and orchestra pit.

**Community-building spaces and atmosphere?** This community of 1,200 was opened to the storytellers. Patrick's Bar stayed open to accommodate storytellers high on story. The

campground was opened early in the year for the storytellers. Peach Church allowed use of its meeting spaces. “You must be one of the storytellers” was a common greeting.

### Unusual?

- The keystone arch bridge over the Turkey River and 9 buildings in the National Register of Historic Places are part of Elkader’s interest.
- The 1903 Opera House with its almost perfect acoustics and seating for about 700 and its terrazzo-floored huge basement with kitchen and restrooms was turned over to the storytellers each year—for \$25 a day.
- Elkader’s namesake, Emir Abd el Kader, was an Algerian leader known as a persuasive orator and a chivalrous opponent. He was an international celebrity at the time of Elkader’s founding. He led thousands and thousands of Christians out of Damascus to save them from almost certain death in that area’s civil war in 1860. For this, he was awarded the grand cross of the Legion of Honor by France—his enemy for more than 15 years. Elkader was a sister city to Mascara, Algeria during the Northlands Era and is to this day in April of 2007. Mayor Ed Olson would sometimes open the storytelling conference by updating attendees with stories about the role this tiny community was playing in international politics.

**Affordable?** Cost to Northlands was limited to \$25 a day for the Opera House—all of it. There was some cost for materials for publicity and paperwork. Meals were planned by Northlands. Peace Church, one block from the Opera House, was provided at no cost for additional meeting spaces and use as a meal site. Volunteers in Northlands did “things.” Registration covered all and left funding for the growth of the organization.

**Food?** Pedretti’s Bakery had always fresh breads and rolls at great prices—someone walked down to get them for the conference events. The Johnsons provided the Saturday night annual meeting dinner. That was a tight fit and they were thrown at first by the serious request for vegetarian alternatives. Local clubs provided meals in the church some years. There were small eating places and a larger restaurant, but none had the staff or capacity to serve lots of people in a hurry. Some discovered the ice cream store and the 2Mitt. The 2Mitt was a food truck that grew out of a gathering where one person would take the orders for burgers, including two with onions or 2 mitt onions, before Northlands’ time. Northlands’ annual influx strained the abilities of the food services in Elkader.

**Lodging?** There was only one motel in town and that filled up early and fully and then some. Drive-to motels in other communities were identified and gradually some residents opened their homes for storytellers at prices not quite those charged by the motel. The campground was great but still cold in April and storytellers walked in snow one year to use the campground showers. There are stories about condemned hotels, chalets, and rooms with mirrors on the ceilings plus the Opera House basement where ants moved some sleepers around while leaking pipes encouraged others to move. Lodging was adventurous but not plentiful.

**Welcoming?** Felt deeply and genuinely by many for all the years although some found it too small, too limited, and too conservative. Parking was free and easily found. The police did not offer tickets but did offer help of many kinds. The police department called on one group

pitching a tent and suggested they move as they were fixing to camp at the RV dump site. The police spoke to several in tents one year saying it was too cold for camping out, why not use the Opera House basement? Still, this small town simply could not become a city for one conference each year.

**Centrally located?** Way out in the countryside, a long drive for many, and no airport or major highway connections were features that some loved, and some did not. Many Northlanders were reminded of early Jonesborough.

Elkader met enough of the storyteller's criteria to be the place where a community of storytellers, was strengthened for 12 Conferences. Fledgling storytellers and a fledgling organization to support storytelling came together to explore, enjoy, and promote the Art in this unusual town of 1,200 people in the rugged hills and farmland of northeast Iowa.

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25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference for the Northlands Storytelling Network