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Rare, 110-year-old Oshkosh Normal School pennant returns “home” to UWO

Written by Grace Lim, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

Tucked along a back corner wall of a two-floor antique store in downtown New London, the yellow-and-white pennant hung for more than a year.

Stitched with the letters “ONS Oshkosh” for Oshkosh Normal School, it was displayed among sports memorabilia in a shop that houses booths from more than 50 dealers, unassuming and easy to overlook.

Today, the rare Oshkosh Normal School pennant, likely dating to around 1915, is returning home. Owned by UW-Oshkosh alumnus Jeff Rickert, ‘91, the pennant is being donated through the UW-Oshkosh Foundation, which will formally gift it to the University Archives.

What began as a quiet moment of recognition has become a meaningful addition to the university’s historical collection.

**A chance discovery**

The story of how the pennant resurfaced began during a winter visit to the shop by Theresa Braatz, a longtime member of UW-Oshkosh’s Alumni Relations team, who noticed it among other sports memorabilia toward the back of the store.

Accustomed to seeing historical and throwback memorabilia through her work with alumni, she said she recognized that the piece might be of interest to the University and snapped a photo for University Archivist Joshua Ranger.

That photo landed in Ranger’s inbox, where he recognized what he was seeing as significant.

Pennants like this were among the earliest forms of collegiate branded merchandise, Ranger said. At the time the pennant was made, the institution was known as Oshkosh Normal School and became Oshkosh State Teachers College in 1927; it officially became the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh in 1971. Long before hoodies and caps became commonplace, pennants were a way for students to show school pride, offering a tangible connection to campus life more than a century ago.

“This pennant is yellow and white, which were the original official colors of this campus,” Ranger said. “Black came later. And the fact that it reads ‘Oshkosh Normal School’ means it’s at least 100 years old.”

The University’s collection includes only one other pennant from the Normal School era, Ranger said, making this discovery especially notable. This newly donated piece could be as old, or possibly older, than the one already held in the archives.

**A full-circle moment**

When Ranger reached out to ask if Rickert would consider donating the pennant through the UW-Oshkosh Foundation, the response was immediate.

“There was no hesitation. He said, ‘yes, of course,’” Ranger said.

For Rickert, the decision came easily.

“It’s just cool,” Rickert said. “It fits there at UWO, and it’s going to be more appreciated there than anywhere else. It’s cool that it’s going home.”

The pennant had been priced at $225 and was displayed in Rickert’s sports memorabilia booth.

Rickert said he didn’t initially recognize the “ONS” lettering when he first came across the pennant. After doing some research, he realized it traced back to the Oshkosh Normal School era, estimating it to be from around 1915.

“Anything with that kind of age to it, and in that shape, is fantastic,” he said.

A computer science major at UW-Oshkosh, Rickert graduated in 1991 and went on to spend 30 years at Kimberly-Clark, where he most recently led information technology (IT) for North American sales and served as interim North American chief information officer. He retired in late 2024.

Rickert and his wife opened Water Street Vintage in 2014, after years of operating booths in antique malls. The timing coincided with their children leaving for college, including their daughter, Kaitlyn (Rickert) Wilfuer, who graduated from UW-Oshkosh in 2016 with a degree in nursing and helped at the store when she was younger.

Looking back on his own time at UW-Oshkosh, Rickert credits the university with preparing him for a rapidly changing field.

“Computer science was really just taking off as a career when I was there,” Rickert said. “I felt like I got a great education.”

He said hands-on, project-based work he did for the Richard W. Koehn Institute for Information Systems & Automation on campus gave him early consulting-style experience he could draw on after graduation.

“It was basically a small consulting company,” Rickert said. “When I went on job interviews, I could actually talk about what I’d done. That was huge.”

For Rickert, preserving a piece of the university’s early history feels like a full-circle moment.

“It could have gone to anyone, and maybe no one would have ever seen it again,” Rickert said. “It’s nice knowing it’ll be in a place where a lot of people can see it.”

**Oldest history, newest home**

The University Archives, which currently resides on the third floor of Polk Library, will eventually move into the revitalized Polk Learning Commons, which will replace the existing Polk Library.

Situated in the heart of campus and adjacent to Reeve Memorial Union, the $137.5 million Polk Learning Commons project was included in the 2025–27 state biennial budget and signed into law July 3 by Gov. Tony Evers. The long-awaited project will modernize a key campus facility that has been in need of renovation, with groundbreaking anticipated next spring and completion currently targeted for 2029.

The facility is designed not only for study and collaboration, but also for storytelling, with built-in display cases and expanded opportunities for public exhibits that will allow the archives to showcase objects that have long remained behind the scenes.

That visibility is something Ranger is already thinking about. Ranger said he hopes the Oshkosh Normal School pennant will be included in future displays once the new space opens.

“These objects make the history real,” Ranger said. “They show students that this place existed, that it mattered, and that students a hundred years ago were just as proud to be here as they are today.”