Former MSU president
James Nickerson dies

By Brian Ojanpa
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — James Nickerson, who as college president cast a large and conciliatory shadow over the most turbulent of times at then-Mankato State, died Friday at age 98.

Nickerson served as president from 1966 to 1973, and gained kudos for the way he handled student protest demonstrations during the Vietnam War years 1970 to 1972.

"When he spoke, they listened, and they didn’t do the kinds of terrible things that happened at Berkeley and Kent State," retired Minnesota State professor H. Roger Smith said.

“They were all set to tear up the pea patch, but he diffused that. He got respect because they trusted him. He didn’t use platitudes.”

Nickerson, who was a musician and also sang opera, presided over significant student growth and the school’s awarding of its first specialist degrees.

Trafton Science Center and an addition to the Centennial Student Union were completed during his tenure.

“Dr. Nickerson provided me with unique insights on being a successful university president. He shared his lifetime of experiences with all of us,” Minnesota State President Richard Davenport said.

“His stories were humorous and meaningful, and we have gained valuable wisdom about leading during difficult times.”

Dave Boyce, a Mankato businessman during the Vietnam protest era, said Nickerson’s cool head prevented potential chaos downtown.

“He kept the students in line. He watched it so it didn’t go overboard.”

In a 2006 book “Out of Chaos,” which contains contributions from dozens of Mankatoans from that war era, Nickerson shared his thoughts about protests in America.

“Parades, bands, flag wavers, protest marches and political rallies are here to stay,” he wrote. “Let’s enjoy them, or at least hear what the opposition has to say.

“Violence and anger have no place in the demonstration. Both block any orderly progression toward accommodation of the difficulty.”

Nickerson in his waning years continued to possess a keen interest in the affairs of the nation, and routinely participated in current-affair informal group discussions at the Blue Earth County Library.

“He was very pleased with the outcome of the last election,” Boyce said. “He could see hope in what was happening.”