Leadership, Planning and Management

The farming scene at the first Farm Crops Show in 1910 was at best hazardous. The muscle of man and the oxen and the horse provided power to till the land.

It was up before dawn to feed the horses and after the day’s field work was done, which was usually after the sun had set, the tired draft animals were unharnessed, fed and curried. Mechanical power was yet the cumbersome steam engine and oil pull combustion engine. Farming was mostly a do-it-yourself operation. Services were just beginning to come on the scene, such as health care, local government, better roads, mail routes, telephones, and equipment dealers. Farms were far apart! Schools beyond the county school were also far apart, and there were no school buses. Lack of technical information and communication in an area with great farming potential was in the mind of James J. Hill when he gave land to the University of Minnesota to found an experiment station and to establish a school of agriculture to teach what was learned on that experiment station. Agricultural scientists were just beginning to settle in the Midwest. The new school of agriculture was founded in 1905 to teach the isolated farm children at a boarding school during the six months of the late fall, winter and early spring season. Ag research and teaching personnel were hired, who brought in new ideas as well as conducted research on problems related to the Red River Basin’s agriculture.

The new experiment station was learning how to handle the rich lake-laid soils and the soils up on the shorelines of old glacial Lake Agassiz. This new information was getting out by word of mouth. The situation was ripe for a new input of farming know-how into the lives of those out on the land.

William Robertson was the first superintendent of this new school of agriculture and it was an immediate success. He passed away enroute on the train to the Twin Cities after a very short service of barely five years. C.G. Selvig, an educator interested in farming and in rural life development, was superintendent of schools at Glencoe, Minnesota. He was a young visionary who had already caught the eye of the State governmental and University leadership for his aggressive and effective leadership. Selvig was appointed as superintendent of the 15-year-old Agricultural Experiment Station and the 5-year-old School of Agriculture. He brought the Farm Institute idea to northwest Minnesota, an adult education activity carried on by the University of Minnesota in southern Minnesota. Besides providing leadership for the School of Agriculture and the Experiment Station, he launched the first Annual Short Course in December of 1910. The Kiehle Building on the N.W. School campus was built in 1909, and it included an auditorium and a gymnasium. The Short Course and Farm Crops Show was held in this modern, exciting facility. This first Short Course laid the foundation for what became the Red River Valley Winter Shows.

A few counties had county agents when the first Annual Short Course was held, but even before the Winter Shows was ten years old nearly every county had one, providing leadership for extension education. This county representative of the University of Minnesota became a local leader for selected Winter Shows activity. He not only harnessed up his office staff but involved other citizen leaders in each county. Vo-Ag instructors began to be hired increasingly after World War I, and they liked the opportunities at the Winter Shows.

Too, the county board of commissioners became interested. Each county board granted modest funds after legislation was passed by the State Legislature which enabled the counties in northwestern Minnesota to appropriate tax funds to be expended by the new association known as the Red River Valley Development Association. This was really the first organization specifically formed for the purpose of assisting with the planning and undergirding of operations of the Red River Valley Winter Shows. The nature and operations of the Development Association are explained in Chapter 6 of this book. The livestock and poultry organizations became cooperating organizations alongside the Red River Valley Development Association.

The number of organizations, institutions and groups cooperating to produce the Winter Shows has grown during the 75 years. Today there are several volunteer committees in each county which change individual makeup from time to time, but for the most part come under the leadership of the county extension director. The Valley Farmer and Homemaker Committee is made up of the presidents of the major farm organizations in the county, plus someone from the Vo-Ag teacher ranks plus the director of the Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service, the county director of the Red River Valley Development Association, and the chairman of the county board of commissioners. The County Extension Director convenes this committee which selects the Valley Farmer and Homemaker couple to be honored at the Red River Valley Winter Shows.

The County King Agassiz Committee is a revolving committee chaired each year by the. County King of the previous year. He calls together a committee of three to five previous county kings. He may consult with Vo-Ag instructors, the county extension director, and citizen leaders to select a young person coming up the ladder of leadership as the county king for the current year and as the candidate for King Agassiz at the Winter Shows to follow. This selection is made in the late winter or spring of each year.

The honored Dairymen Committee, headed by the County Extension Director plus previously honored dairymen, meets to select the dairymen to be honored at the banquet at the time of the Red River Valley Winter Shows. Located over the broad region are several general committees having specific duties, like the Women’s Division. These are covered in another section of this history.

Citizen leadership in the early days was found close to Crookston because communication for the planning process needed people located close to the Experiment Station and School of