CHAPTER IV

Educational, Promotional, and Social

The Red River Valley Winter Shows began and largely remains as a "people-on-the-land" idea. From the very beginning, in 1910, the idea concerned those who made a living from the land. In that first decade of this century the venture was a pioneering effort by a people who believed that this open prairie land and the transition between the heavy forests of northern Minnesota and the prairie was a resource with a future. They believed one could earn an acceptable standard of living for themselves and produce food and fiber for themselves and for others.

The adult educational opportunities for those who were on the land and for those who were beginning to service the farming industry were nearly non-existent. The situation needed educational service and agricultural research. The University was nudged to move ahead with educational service through the efforts of farsighted legislators and industrialists like James J. Hill. By 1910 the Experiment Station had gone through its birthing pains and had developed enough know-how so there was a modest list of farm practices which could be shared with the farming public. The School of Agriculture was established in 1905 and began teaching in 1906 with a staff which included professional agriculturists. People wanted to know these teachers.

Into this situation C.G. Selvig was appointed superintendent in 1910, and he didn't take very long to organize his staff and interested leaders to step into that adult educational vacuum. Selvig and his staff put together the first extension meetings for farmers. People came, they visited, they met new friends, they learned, and came away enthusiastic and wanting more. The feedback from farmers served to set the pace for the Agricultural Experiment Station. Researchers heard firsthand about problems out on the farm. Numbers of livestock increased immediately on the Station. The scientists went to work in horticulture, on soils research, on improved varieties, on looking at better procedures to manage the difficult soils and the water. The Winter Shows had been going about five or six years when the county agent system took a quantum leap forward in northwestern Minnesota. By the middle 20's most of the counties had a full-time county agent providing a much-needed adult education leader locally in each county. The presence of a top level adult education service in each county began to change the kind of meetings and seminars that were held at the Winter Shows. It didn't make sense to talk over the same ideas at the Winter Shows that were talked about and taught at the meetings of the county agents and of the home economists. The natural development in the adult education at the Winter Shows was to talk about topics which weren't covered at the county level. In the early 20's, too, the vocational agricultural departments in the high schools increased. Here was another support for adult education for the farming public. This group, too, teamed up with the Red River Valley Winter Shows and integrated it as an extension of and as a partner to their educational work.

Learning also took place at the attractive displays of machinery and other farm service needs. Ideas came from visiting with others from the region. New ideas from agricultural experts were brought in from outside and beyond. Every farmer and his wife, as they farmed and raised their family, encountered difficulties along the way. An opportunity to visit with other farmers helped understand these difficulties and was in itself therapeutic, inspirational, and educational. The Winter Shows has been educational, promotional, and social throughout the 75 years. While it actually began as a pioneer educational function serving those who were launching the farming industry in northwestern Minnesota, the show has been, in more recent times, careful to complement and strengthen the other educational agencies: extension and vocational agriculture.

Travel to the educational meetings in the early years was difficult. Few cars were in use, and the roads available were not usable the year around. People would travel from their farms to town by horse-drawn sleigh. After leaving the horses in the livery barn for care and feeding, the visitors, bound for the meetings, boarded the train for Crookston. They'd stay for a day or more. The railroad cooperated by providing a half fare for a round trip. During that period there was a daily train from Noyes to Crookston and return, allowing people to attend the daytime meetings. A daily train from Warroad to Crookston and return was scheduled and several from Moorhead would be arranged, as was one from Staples to Crookston.

People who wanted to attend the very popular evening meetings had to ask neighbors to look after their livestock. Some came for the entire Show, therefore a housing bureau provided rooms in Crookston. The railroad also furnished special sleeping cars on the track, with a steam engine hooked up for heat. Even with those helpful arrangements, it was quite a project just to travel back and forth to the Winter Shows each year.

The early formal educational programs were planned around topics of the time. The technical meetings for men and for women were immediately popular and, for a number of years, were very much like the extension meetings held out in the counties. Of course, though lacking the tremendous visual aids of today, the show, without a doubt, used the up-to-date communication devices of that day. The evening programs included speakers who usually came from the University of Minnesota, from a state government or from outside of the state. The lecturers were very popular. Attendance ran from a few hundred to crowds of 1,500 or more. Occasionally the new armory, which held 1,800 seats, was filled, and the overflow would be housed in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Very popular speakers addressed all three audiences. In later years the addresses were piped in by loudspeaker. People were more patient in those days with outside lecturers. They came to listen and to learn. The evening lecture idea was well received into the 1940's; in fact, the last top notch lectures were scheduled until the middle 1950's. By that time radio, television, news-