CHAPTER IX

Farm Service Show

Men and women from Red River Valley farms liked the first Annual Short Course and Farm Crop Show held at the University Campus at Crookston in 1910. They wanted more time for exchanging ideas among themselves, for hearing about farming from other areas, and for hearing speakers on governmental and other topics. The crop show was an immediate success. It demonstrated the quality of grain and forage which was being produced in N.W. Minnesota. The women's meetings were especially appreciated.

Farming at this time was certainly largely a do-it-yourself enterprise. However, farmers were beginning to buy services which were evolving in towns and villages. Farm machinery sales and service, financial services, health services, schools, cultural activity, water management know how, were among the growing needs of people on the land.

A war between major nations always increases the rate at which technology is developed, and this fact was no different in World War I. The services that developed to support the farming industry grew at a faster rate right after the war to-end-all wars. Consequently, farmers, their wives, and children not only wanted to learn about food and fiber production, but they wanted to see the latest and newest equipment.

The first Industrial Show was held in the new buildings downtown and was a success. On-the-farm equipment for the dairymen, newest machinery to be powered by horses, the developing farm tractors, farm tractor equipment, and household equipment were shown by enthusiastic concessioners. Some salesmen made enough contacts to carry them through months of customer sales and service. The initial show was an exciting happening but a big problem for the arrangements committee. The armory space was needed for the popular evening lectures. Already, the ponderous steam engines, oil pull tractors, and grain separators wanted space. The need for ground level space with large doors was clear by 1919. Two buildings were completed by the Livestock Association by that year and paid for by gifts and the sale of shares. This success encouraged the show managers to plan a third building for the “Industrial Show” as it was called.

Livestock producers weren’t too excited about the third building. The farm economy was going downhill. Yet, plans were developed, some funds were raised, and the rest borrowed to build Annex B, known as the Industrial Building. The building was 40’ x 144’ and was specifically set aside for the Industrial Show, what is known today as the Farm Service Show, a major segment of Winter Shows. It, too, was an immediate success when put to use in 1920.

The Winter Shows Board of Managers, the official title of the planning leadership in 1920 and since, disapproved of the frivolous concessions, the carnival atmosphere and the kind of activities which merely parted people from their money and really didn’t give anything substantive in return. The board has never approved...
the noisy hawking type of concession but rather has emphasized attractive, well-designed, booth displays, those that depend on people stopping by in a reasonably quiet atmosphere to look, to learn, and to question. This policy hasn’t been easy to maintain, and there have been times when concessions slipped in without the board knowing all the facts. Needless to say, these hawkers weren’t allowed to come back a second year.

While sales of a product or service is the name of the game, again, the board of managers likes to emphasize that showing a product is of prime importance.

Overbearing and overt sales campaigning which tends to disturb other concessioners or unduly pursue the customer is avoided. Currently, there are concessioners which have been with the Red River Valley Winter Shows for over 40 years, and there are many others who have exhibited between 20 and 30. The whole gamut of services to the farming industry can now be found at the RRVWS: farm machinery, household machinery and equipment, mass media, farm buildings, fertilizers, pesticides, governmental service, farm organizations, church, homemaking, and youth groups, farm organizations, and Hobbyists. This long list doesn’t fully cover the variety of concessioners who buy space at the show each year and tend their booths for the Farm Service Show.

Today the total number of concessioners is 331. The income is about $147,600. The first show had 26 concessioners who collectively paid $510 to show their wares in the armory. There were those who could not be admitted because of their large equipment or because all space had been allotted. Today there is still a waiting list of people who want to display at the show. A list of the first concessioners at the 1917 show is in the appendix, as well as a list of those who were at a recent show. Three farm service concessioners who have been with the Winter Shows for 30 years or more are Agsco, Inc., Grand Forks, ND; Bemidji Woollen Mills, Bemidji, MN; and Townsend, Inc., Fergus Falls.

Here are some of the comments: “We make most of our living at fairs, celebrations and the like.”

“The Red River Valley Winter Shows is one of the best run shows and we do a top dollar business there every year.”

“We meet hundreds of our regular customers, talk over new products, and meet new friends. It is one of the best shows of its kind for our business.”

“The Winter Shows at Crookston has been a good outlet for woolen goods. Paul Breken was one of our favorite people with the Winter Show.”

The industrial show at the current time is a substantial source of income for operating the Winter Shows. The standard charges made at this time are $3.75 per square foot of space. The rate is less than at some of the other regional shows held in the wintertime, such as the shows in Brandon, Manitoba, and Valley City, North Dakota.

A farmer from the region recently commented that “the Service Show isn’t as useful as it used to be. The amount of farm equipment shown seems to be going downhill. The new ideas coming on the market aren’t necessarily at the Winter Shows as they used to be.” A few farmers from the easterly part of the region have observed that the smaller kind of farm equipment that they used to be able to come to see is not always displayed. Can the winter shows insure that the latest in small farm, as well as large farm equipment, be at the show each year? Maybe this criticism needs a good look in the years ahead!

There are many small booths creeping in with their objective of accumulating names on a list and communicating with the prospects about their product after the show is over. Many booths offer a gift to lucky people at drawings held at the close of the show. Literature on services abound. A few visitors come equipped with their ink pads and stamps and visit all of the booths getting their names on the prize drawing lists.

One concessioner who wishes to remain unnamed indicates that he has been at the show for many years and he has made his living selling equipment and facilities to farm people. He is enthusiastic because he learns from farm people as they stop by his booth at the show. They help him stay abreast of building needs on the changing farm scene. He says he makes contacts annually which add up to over sixty percent of his business for the entire year. A concessioner who represents one of the farm organizations indicated that the Red River Valley Winter Shows is one of the solid farm expositions in the entire midcontinent. Further, he indicated that having it in the midwinter was especially good because while a few can go south to Florida and Arizona, most people have to stay here.

Attending an exposition in the middle of winter gives them a place to go, to visit, to see new ideas, to talk over some of their plans, and to go back home renewed and uplifted. A member of an organization says he has a chance to renew acquaintance with his far-flung membership over the entire northwestern Minnesota. He wouldn’t miss the show for anything.

What’s the future of the Farm Service Show? Undoubtedly, the board of managers would be hard put to meet the expenses of the ten-day exposition without the rentals from a Farm Service Show. All good and worthwhile ideas need constant evaluation and adjustments as needed. There is an undertone of thinking that questions whether the trend of the modern Farm Service Show is away from a learning experience with the latest equipment and ideas for food and fiber production. Is there too much emphasis on commercialism and not enough on displaying new products and new ideas which build the quality of farming? Is having a member on the board of managers from the farm service industry appropriate? This idea isn’t new, but has been dropped from time to time because the concessioners aren’t an organized group. Representing the interests of all concessioners would be very difficult for such an individual board member. The board of managers recognizes the communications gap and is spending an increasing amount of time with the concessioners each year. Maybe the board of managers needs to be listening to what show visitors are saying about the farm service show.

Certainly the number of services available to the modern farm enterprise are nearly countless in number. Finding a desirable balance between new and continuing ideas and services each year is probably the major challenge facing the board in the immediate years ahead. An interesting, neat Service Show of wide variety should be of most educational value to the greatest number of show visitors, both farm and non-farm families.