CHAPTER III

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. The marketing of the farm produce required a living where the family lived. It was a small business. The muscle of man and the horse 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.

Crops Shows were well received. It was a way to show off the farmer’s produce. It was a way to learn from others. It was a way to sell produce. It was a way to promote local agriculture. It was a way to show off the farmer’s skills. It was a way to show off the farmer’s produce. It was a way to sell produce. It was a way to promote local agriculture. It was a way to show off the farmer’s skills. It was a way to show off the farmer’s produce. It was a way to sell produce. It was a way to promote local agriculture. It was a way to show off the farmer’s skills.

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Agriculture. Consequently, business leaders from banks, farm machinery companies, abstracting companies, the medical and law professions and farmers were the first cooperating volunteers to assist Superintendent Selvig and the staff in those early years. The story of such cooperation is well told in C.G. Selvig’s book entitled, “The Tale of Two Valleys” and will not be detailed in this historical writing. Citizen leaders were generous with their time and with their money to get this learning experience operating each year; particularly they supported the Crops Show, the Livestock Show, and a later Farm Service Show.

The first big change in planning was to move those dates to early February. About 400 people came the second year, more than the campus could handle with school classes of ag students also on the scene. The railroad furnished sleeping cars on the sidings in Crookston and on the campus so people could stay there during the Crops Show. The City of Crookston came through in grand style. They offered to help organize meeting space and places to stay in downtown Crookston. The new armory was completed as were the Livestock Association buildings next door.

The City of Crookston and its surrounding area, though, has always been ready to support the Winter Shows. For instance, when the fund drive was held for the buildings that were dedicated north of Crookston in 1962, nearly half of the $320,000 that was pledged to support this building effort was raised in the West Polk County area. The rest was raised in counties beyond and in the Twin Cities. The area Chamber of Commerce in Crookston has one person on the board of managers today. The city also welcomes visitors with special sales of merchandise, put out their “welcome” flags, have a special booth at the Show with give away packets and coupons good at shopping establishments. In addition, they provide bus service throughout the Show from downtown to the Show and back.

The State of Minnesota expressed an early interest in the Red River Valley Winter Shows. Already mentioned is the fact that the State legislature passed enabling legislation so the counties could appropriate tax dollars for selected activities at the Show. Since the early 1920’s, the State Department of Agriculture has always had educational booths at the Show and the State Highway Department has had a booth at the Show for the last two decades. The State Department of Education has always encouraged youth activities there by recognizing that the FFA attendance was part of their youth training. During his tenure in office, the governor always attends a Show.

While the University of Minnesota Experiment Station and School of Agriculture and each County Extension Office were really the key people who organized the idea of the annual Short Course and Farm Crops Show (today known as the Red River Valley Winter Shows), it didn’t take very long - even back in 1910 and 1911 - for existing commodity organizations to give strong support and leadership to for Winter Shows activities. The Dairymen’s Association, founded in 1902, was in the forefront when the Livestock Show activities began. The Red River Valley Livestock Breeders Association, founded in 1914, was especially active in finding space so a Livestock Show could begin. They incorporated themselves in 1919 with a legal constitution and bylaws under Minnesota incorporation laws.

Consequently, the first of the Winter Show organization to take title to property utilized by the Winter Shows was the Red River Valley Livestock Association.

Another early organization was the Northern Minnesota Poultry Association. This actually was a small association of active farmers growing poultry for eggs and meat and of poultry fanciers showing exotic breeds. These other poultry farmers and fanciers held a modest show each year. Later they joined the Winter Shows ranks with their show and became part of the scene by 1915.

The Crops and Soils Association organized about 1916 for the purpose of getting behind the Crops Show as well as for other matters of interest relating to growing crops in northwestern Minnesota. This group was influential in matters of new crop variety development until the 1960s. The Red River Valley Development Association, not a commodity organization, organized as a group of citizens representing each of the 14 counties. Their responsibility at the outset and still today is to expend a certain amount of money appropriated by each of the counties for specified activities at each Winter Show. The two large counties have two representatives each. All other counties have one representative.

There were a number of women’s clubs in the Crookston vicinity which provided leadership for those early women’s activities.

These organizations just named and briefly described joined hands in the second decade (1910-1920) and really cooperated through the decades up to the 1940s and 1950s. Ideas about a new location and facilities surfaced in the late 1950s and the board of managers recognized there were several agricultural and related organizations in the region who might wish to be part of the Winter Shows activity. Several of these petitioned to have a representative on the board of managers, and the number of organizations grew from a half dozen to 18 quickly. Another chapter identifies the current organizations in the Red River Basin who have membership on the Red River Valley Winter Shows Board of Managers Incorporated, as well as a description of their functions and organization.

The Red River Valley Winter Shows board of managers has been very sensitive of the interest and thinking of the public before they have embarked on major fundraising campaigns. Three campaigns for building funds have been conducted in the 75-year history, and each one had enough success to accomplish the building mission for which the campaign was designed. An unusual feature of these volunteer capital investments by individuals and organizations of the 14-county area is the near one hundred percent payment of pledges made to each campaign.

There isn’t any question but that raising funds has become a mighty effort on the part of many varied organizations throughout society. Any future fundraising by the board of managers is going to have to be done carefully. Before proceeding, the wishes and support of the public must be sounded out very carefully, not only by the board of managers themselves, but by consultation with those who have expertise. Unless there is support for an idea before the campaign, a major fund-raiser for Winter Shows will not succeed.

Publicity for the Show activities and the early years was entirely handled by the superintendent and staff of the Northwest School and Experiment Station. Limited publicity was done by some of the commodity organizations. The women’s activity committee usually handled their own publicity. This loosely planned situation existed right up through the 1960s. In fact, preshow publicity was handled by the
Northwest Experiment Station superintendent and staff until about 1981. The board of managers did provide a publicity office and engage volunteers and some part-time paid people beginning in the 1960s when the new building was built north of Crookston. This system has continued to grow in capability. The most exciting thing happening with publicity is that the rural communications department of the Division of Agriculture of the Technical College has provided media service as an “on the job training” laboratory exercise for the rural communication classes, another example of a unique educational experience available because there is a Winter Shows. Also this group has begun to take on some preshow planning for advertising the show. Preshow publicity now is handled by the Winter Shows board of managers through the growing strength of the Winter Shows office.

When the new building was in the “talking” stage in the late 1950s and the decision was made to move ahead, there was just more frontline leadership needed than the superintendent and staff of the Northwest School and Experiment Station had available. Consequently, a full-time Winter Shows manager by the name of Victor Hodgson, former City Clerk from the City of Crookston, was hired to take over follow-up and coordination and management of activities, beginning with the financial campaign and the building process, and for some time thereafter. Hope was that enough income could be generated so this full-time manager could be on the scene permanently. However, about two years after the building was built, it became quite clear to the board that they’d have to let this capable person go to another job. Mr. Hodgson carried the Red River Valley Winter Shows management through one of its difficult periods. The board was sold on trying again with a full-time manager; however, this, too, didn’t generate the projected earnings because the second full-time manager had to be released to other job opportunities.

A part-time manager was then hired in 1966. Paul Brekken, though a full-time farmer, was willing to provide leadership for the Winter Shows beginning in November of each year and continuing through March. Under Brekken’s management the board of managers was able to turn things around financially. The payments on the building were refinanced, details of which are mentioned in another section of this book. The building payments were met each year. In fact, when Mr. Brekken resigned, the managers were several years ahead on the remaining mortgage, with very little left to pay off. A nephew of Paul Brekken, Larry Brekken, was hired in 1979 to provide the same kind of part-time managership until July, 1983. Previous to that time the board had again been evaluating the need for a full-time manager for several months. With Mr. Brekken’s resignation, they hired such a manager, commencing July 1, 1983, Phil Miller. While a full-time manager is hired to coordinate and generally manage day to day affairs under the policies of the shows board, the Winter Shows is still a volunteer operation. This is one of the major strengths of the institution known as the Winter Shows. The board of managers are elected because they are the kind of people who will give of their time and energy and substance in planning and managing this exposition for northwestern Minnesota.

The concept of volunteerism in the planning and management is a very important part of the history of the Red River Valley Winter Shows. The appendix section of this history has a complete listing of all the committees which now are active in planning and managing show affairs each year. There are many committees out in the counties which aren’t listed. Among these volunteers is a committee of financial consultants from banks and savings and loan associations. This group is called upon whenever any unusual capital improvement is being considered or when refinancing of capital debt becomes an option. This committee has been very helpful to busy members of the board of managers, as they have managed fiscal matters through the past 30 years.

The full-time manager is on a salary. The board members, continue, however, to serve without pay. They may collect expenses for mileage and meals while on Winter Shows work. In a society where one can see the concept of volunteerism dying out in the country, one has to raise the question of how long volunteerism will be a viable force in the Red River Valley Shows? Without doubt, volunteer committees and ideas from the 14-county area in northwestern Minnesota have built, maintained, and strengthened the Winter Shows decade after decade. The idea is still alive and important in this part of the U.S.A.

Finally, it appears that with all the ongoing details, a combination of good strong volunteerism with a modest amount of paid management and a lean but capable clerical staff will be needed to maintain the thrust of the Winter Shows mission in the decades ahead.

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SALUTES THE Red River Valley Winter Shows ON THEIR 75TH ANNIVERSARY!