CHAPTER II

National Setting and Local Evolution of the Winter Shows

The Morrill Act, signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, approximately 50 years before the first Farm Crops Show, was perhaps the most significant event in the history of American higher education. Going to college had been only for the wealthy and influential families. Few would dispute the importance of the access to higher education by the general public which the Land Grant University idea brought to the working people in each state. The commitment of service to all citizens of an entire state by such universities was what was different from private colleges. The close ties between the people of the state and its Land Grant University were developments that might not have been foreseen by Justin Morrill, the far-sighted author of the Morrill Act. This Land Grant idea was especially acceptable in the great Midwest. Farmers were quick to find the availability of highly trained researchers and educators on the staffs of the Land Grant Colleges.

The single most significant factor in the initial meeting of the farmers’ Short Course was that the Land Grant University of the State of Minnesota was reaching out to the pioneering farmers in northwestern Minnesota. An Experiment Station and a School of Agriculture had been established to provide outreach education for those who were living on the farm and for those who were servicing farmers, and to engage in research which would assist those on the land with their production problems. This reaching out was part of the philosophical mission of the Land Grant University. The superintendent and staff of the Northwest School and Experiment Station provided leadership and expertise to launch the educational service of the Short Course and Farm Crops Show and to continue to provide ongoing stability and leadership for this new arm of the Land Grant College. They attempted to encourage and enliven organizations and create interest in the launching and the continuation of the Winter Shows. This leadership has varied through the years from too much University influence and effort to a leadership organized in a nonprofit service corporation representative of all major organizations, groups, and institutions in northwestern Minnesota. The service function of the University at Crookston continues and has been augmented greatly by another sector of the University, the agricultural extension service and homemaking education in each county.

Several names have been used as this midwinter exposition has traveled through the 75-year history. It began, patterned somewhat after the farm institutes that were being held in individual communities of southern Minnesota and North Dakota. The first show was called the Short Course and Farm Crops Show, and this title continued for some time. In 1918, the combined premium and program book was entitled “The Red River Valley Farm Crops Show and Northwestern Minnesota Farmers Week Meetings.” In 1925, the program book and premium book was entitled “The Red River Valley Classic - The Red River Valley Winter Show.” In 1928, the official program and premium book was called “The Northwest School Farmer’s Week and the Red River Valley Winter Shows.” This title lasted until 1969 when the name of the event became “The Red River Valley Winter Show and the Northwest Farm and Home Week,” and this is the title used today.

Probably the changes are largely the result of University leadership through the years. In fact, up until the late 1940’s the premium book as well as the program book were published by the Northwest School and Experiment Station as part of their service to the Red River Valley Winter Shows. In the late 1940’s the board of managers

Site of the Winter Shows Buildings on Broadway, Crookston. Extreme left is the Armory which was rented annually. The “Chevrolet” sign is on the livestock pavilion of the Winter Shows and was rented between shows to the auto dealer. The taller building at the very extreme right down the street is the Industrial Building of the Winter Shows.
took over publication of the premium book, and the University continued publishing the program book until the early 1980's when it, too, was assumed by the Winter Shows board of managers.

While service and outreach educational concerns of the University were certainly paramount in launching the Winter Shows in northwestern Minnesota, yet in actuality, the University could not have accomplished that task by itself. The citizen leaders from the city of Crookston, from surrounding communities, and from the commodity organizations which were in the early history of their formation, all responded to the invitation of University leadership in the planning and operations each year. By planning and operations each year. By the time the Winter Shows was ten years old, the Red River Valley Livestock Association, the Red River Valley Development Association, the Red River Valley Daivymen's Association, the Northern Minnesota Poultry Association, and the Crookston Commercial Club were substantial and strong cooperators with the leadership provided by the School of Agriculture and Experiment Station superintendent and staff.

Recorded history reads that Supt. Conrad Selvig recognized that leadership in each of the many counties was needed. There were very few county agents in the early years. The Red River Valley Development Association and the Red River Valley Livestock Breeders Association were organized in 1914. These two organizations have provided a steady force of county level grassroots citizen leadership since 1914. Their involvement has included financial support and government of the show. It is interesting to note that Experiment Station staff personnel or the superintendent of the Experiment Station have always been among the officers of the Red River Valley Livestock Association, the Red River Valley Development Association, and the Winter Shows arrangements committee (the board of managers today). In fact, it wasn't unusual to find the superintendent and staff members of the Extension Service or Experiment Station providing

The main entrance to the Livestock Pavilion on a mild winter, mid-afternoon day in 1928.

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four board memberships on the board of ten. Too, there were times when the superintendent of the School and Experiment Station served as president of all three of the leading boards named. The neutral nature of the University resulted in automatic election of the superintendent as president of the show. This custom continued for 73 years until 1982.

This early group of organizations were primary in leading the show for about 45 years. There were a number of related groups like the County Agent Association, Boys and Girls Clubs, Crops and Soil Association, and farm clubs who became satellite cooperators with varying degrees of involvement. Today there are 21 different Valley-wide organizations represented on the board of managers. Each one is a cooperator in planning and executing the annual Winter Shows. A list of these and what they represent is found in the appendix. This group of cooperating organizations, in addition to a number of volunteer arrangements committees throughout the counties, is the greatest single substantive influence which has kept the Winter Shows alive in the past, maintains it in the present, and will in the future. Newly formed organizations serving farming across the region may well join the Winter Shows board in the future.

A list of committees established by the board of managers for 1984 is recorded in the appendix. Too, there are several committees existing in each county which are not listed. Adding up the total number of people who provide from a few minutes of planning to many, days and weeks of time, the total number of volunteers in the 14-county area exceeds 300 people. If the Winter Shows ever loses this volunteer characteristic it may well lose its effectiveness as a unique educational arm of the grassroots leadership in the Red River Basin, an arm which harnesses the expertise of the Land Grant College to the energy and effort of all major organizations related to agriculture in northwestern Minnesota.

Life hasn't been always smooth and easy for the Red River Valley Winter Shows. The government of the show has gone through the stress and anxiety of cooperating organizations vying for an upper hand. The heavy volunteer nature of the organization even today presents problems to the management. Throughout the 75 years, however, the sincerity and purpose of the Red River Valley Winter Shows exposition has been proved. It was once upheld in the courts when the lack of information on the part of well-meaning but uninformed citizens involved the board of managers in a law suit where the Winter Shows had to fight for its life. The law suit went all the way through the Minnesota Supreme Court. The decision was made in favor of the ongoing Winter Shows.

The lesson learned here was that the Winter Shows had grown up, and relationships out in the 14-county area had become more complicated. A stronger organization was needed. Consequently, in the early 50's, the Red River Valley Winter Shows board of managers was officially incorporated. A strong membership, nonprofit, tax exempt corporation was organized under Minnesota law. By and large, except for updating brought about by the changing scene, these articles of incorporation and by-laws are essentially the same today as they were in the early 1950's.

Bill Strickler of Euclid relates an interesting sidelight to the law suit experience. Four members of the board of managers were requested by the legal counsel for the Winter Shows to be at the hearing by the Minnesota Supreme Court in St. Paul. The court

These boys and girls represented their home schools and counties at the annual Red River Valley Spelling Contest held Friday in connection with the Winter Shows at Crookston. LaVerne Balme of Gully, Polk County was named winner of the trophy. Other contestants were: Allan Daslund of Perley; Lorraine Hietala of Sebeka; Ruth Stenslund of Drayton, ND; Twila Nygaard of Grygla; Opal Walsh of Arago; Alice Davis of Gration; Charles Swanson of Red Lake Falls; Delores Lehman of Breckenridge; Julia Lundmark of Bagley; Arnold Engelstad of Thief River Falls; Elaine Aasland of Warroad; and Bill Klinke of Lengby. Date unknown, probably in 1930s.

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chambers were in the State Capitol building at that time. These board members traveled to the big city and arrived at what they thought was the Capitol. The building was impressive! Strickler, P.M. Finkenbinder, Crookston; Paul Engelstad, Thief River Falls; and J.H. Sargent, Crookston, climbed the expanse of steps and entered through the gigantic doors. It was quiet inside. A smiling person noted their entry and inquired.

"May I help you?"

"Yes" said Mr. Sargent, "Can you show us the room where the Supreme Court is located?"

The smile broadened on the face of the young Catholic priest, "You're in the St. Paul Cathedral. I'll go out with you and point out the capitol building."

On the way down the steps Paul Engelstad remarked, "Well, maybe that was the place to start anyhow!"

After a good chuckle by all and a short walk, they found the hearing room a short distance away, with Leonard Erickson, legal counsel to the board, awaiting them.

A major change in the Winter Shows operations came in 1960 when the Red River Valley Livestock Association, one of the cooperating organizations and an early and continuing supporter of the Winter Shows idea since 1914, gave the title to the buildings which the Winter Shows used in downtown Crookston. These buildings were turned over to the board of managers. Of course, that meant the Red River Valley Winter Shows board of managers could use this property as they campaigned for funds and as they acquired land and built new facilities on the site currently used north of the city of Crookston. Along with that change, a number of farm-related organizations and groups were interested in being a part of the new move from downtown Crookston.

The Winter Shows has an interesting relationship to the National Guard of the State of Minnesota. Back in 1914 it became clear that a National Guard armory would be built on Main Street in downtown Crookston. It was then that the Winter Shows committee went to work acquiring property right next door to the armory and building buildings with the understanding that the Winter Shows could rent the armory every year when the show was scheduled, and this good working relationship on Main Street, Crookston, continued year after year. Shortly after the Winter Shows built new buildings north of Crookston in 1961, the National Guard was looking for another location and needed a site on the outskirts of the city. The Winter Shows board of managers offered to sell five acres for that purpose. The National Guard selected that site after considering three different locations.

Here again for the second time in the history of the Winter Shows, a cooperative arrangement was established where the National Guard Armory would be available for use by the Winter Shows each year as scheduled.

The Red River Valley Winter Shows has operated at four different locations. In the very early years it was conducted at the Northwest School and Experiment Station. Immediately it was seen that this site was inconvenient because the visitors wanted the show sometime in February and that was when the campus was crowded with students. The Short Course and Crops Show was moved downtown in 1914 into a rented garage for the Crops Show and into the Grand Opera House and the Commercial Hotel for meetings. Show space was hard to find. As the Livestock Show developed, other garages and livery barns were found. The building of the new armory provided space for over a thousand people at a meeting and thus provided the third and more permanent location. Land was acquired and buildings were built in close proximity to the armory. The handy locations of the Presbyterian/Methodist churches along with the Grand Theatre and the public school buildings set up this third location, an arrangement which lasted from about 1920 to 1962. Today the Winter
The flags are out and decorative pylons at the intersections on Broadway Street, Crookston, looking northwards from Second Street. The Commercial Hotel served well as a place to stay, to eat, and to have meetings.

Shows finds itself in its fourth home on the northern edge of the city of Crookston on Highway 2 and 75, located on 25 acres of land with buildings and facilities worth in excess of three million dollars.

A very useful relationship was established in the late 1970's. The light horse management training program at the University of Minnesota Technical College in Crookston needed an up-to-date modern stable for housing and care of recreational horses. Here the Winter Shows board of managers and the University worked out an arrangement. The board of managers built a stabling facility for long-time lease by the college and also an additional arena for Winter Shows concession space which they also leased to the Technical College as a riding laboratory and teaching facility in light horse management. This is another example of the "do it yourself spirit" of people in northwestern Minnesota. These facilities would have cost the taxpayers over a million dollars, and here they've been provided by the cooperative relationship of the Winter Shows and the University at no capital building expense to the taxpayers of Minnesota.

There will probably never be enough money available to do all of the things that the Winter Shows board of managers would like to do. Maybe that is good. It keeps the volunteer planners and managers on their toes. There have been times when the financial outlook was a bit bleak but when you realize that the 75-year history includes two major world wars, a major depression, a fire, and 75 years of volunteer planning and leadership, the present several million dollar facility has to be an unusual accomplishment by citizens of the 14 counties. The board of managers has handled its money well over the years. Certainly the record is not clear of errors in judgment, but prudent management by the leadership may be best expressed by noting that some 20 banks carry the mortgage capital debt owed on the facilities. Details can be found in the appendix. Certainly hard-nosed bankers aren't going to set up long-term mortgage paper if past operations do not merit appropriate faith and trust.

The Winter Shows is a midwinter break. It is a time when people are ready to get out of the house and get away for visiting, for learning, and for having a little fun. Modern roads, automobiles, snowplows and communication media make this winter activity quite easy today compared with the efforts necessary by the pioneers. The balance of this book will attempt to gather in one volume a sampling of the human spirit and energetic dedication associated with the 75 year Red River Valley Winter Shows.

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